CASTE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MR. ARLE,"

"MY SON'S WIFE,"

"BRUNA'S REVENGE,"

"COLONEL DACRE,"

ETC.

" Strange is it, that our bloods,
Of colour, weight, and heat, pour'd all together,
Would quite confound distinction, yet stand off
In differences so mighty."

SHAKESPEARE.

NEW EDITION.

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CASTE.

CHAPTER I.

GOVERNESS AND PUPILS.

A YOUNG girl sat at the piano in the drawing-room of Miss Erlridge's boarding-school, ruffling her brow into perplexed lines. She was not playing, but pencilling down chords on a sheet of music paper, and her cheek was flushed by the earnestness with which she worked. The great bow-window of the room was so screened and garlanded by a passion vine that the light came in green and cool: outside, the sun was shining fiercely upon the piece of ground called, by courtesy, the garden.

Opposite the window were folding-doors, now standing a little way open, leading into the dining-room, which looked out upon a weed-grown square of a quaint old cathedral town. Through the folding-doors came the sound of voices: one loud, decided, and unrefined—the other low, timid, and dove-like. These voices the girl at the piano did not heed till her own name caught her ear, when the pencil paused, the head was sharply lifted up. She only listened a moment, then rose, took her sheets of music-paper in her hand, and went through the folding-doors into the other room; she might have escaped without entering it.

Her cheek had flushed a little more, but it was in a very quiet voice that she said—

"I have been in the drawing-room for some time, Miss Erlridge, doing my thorough-bass, and I heard what I believe was not intended for me to hear."

"And will you kindly introduce me to this young lady, Miss Erlridge?" the owner of the loud voice asked. "We met just now in the school-room; no doubt, she is a friend of my Jane's."

"I am Isabel Wold, and have not the honour of your daughter's friendship," the girl answered, before her governess had time to speak. Then, with a bend in the dancing-master's stiffest style, she left the room.

The absent-eyed Miss Erlridge glanced after her pupil uneasily. Yet there was an expression of mild triumph in her face when she turned to her visitor.

The visitor said—

"Well, I must confess she is a lady-like looking girl; indeed, at the first hasty glance I took her to be Miss Blanchard. But still, as I said, you owe it to yourself, Miss Erlridge, to keep your school select, and of a high class; and if you once admit the daughters of trades-people, there's an end to all hope of doing that. Ah! here is my Jane at last. How long you have been, my dear! Good morning, Miss Erlridge. You know I am a plain-spoken woman, and you will not take offence at what I've said. Come, Jane; the horses have been waiting ever so long."

Mrs. Ravey settled her silks, making a formidable rustling, and departed accompanied by her daughter—a heavy-featured, sullen-eyed damsel.

Miss Erlridge sat in deep thought long after their carriage had rattled out of the square.

Isabel Wold had gone up to the little music-room where her friend Clara Blanchard was stumbling through somebody's "Reverie." The way in which she opened and closed the door, and flung down her sheets of music, betokened considerable irritation.

"What is the matter, Isa?" Clara asked, pausing and turning round on the music-stool.

She received no answer. Isabel walked to the window.

After a few minutes the "Reverie" was resumed where it had broken off; the performer was accustomed to respect her friend's silent moods.

"What irritating music that is! how *can* you have patience to practise it?" Isabel exclaimed presently, turning a scowling face towards the piano.

"I think my hour is up—I'll leave off. But what *is* the matter? Do tell me, please."

"Nothing—at least, so small a something that I am ashamed it should have power to annoy me."

"Tell me, dear, what is it?"

"If you must know, then, this is the mighty matter. While I was in the drawing-room I overheard Mrs. Ravey, who was in the other room talking to Miss Erlridge, mention my father's name. Before I could let them know I was within hearing, Mrs. Ravey asked Miss Erlridge, in a voice of deep concern, if it were really true that she had 'a daughter of Wold's' in her school, and at once commence a tirade about the imprudence of receiving a tradesman's daughter if she wished to keep up the character of her 'establishment.' Think of her fearing that *I* should contaminate Jane Ravey—a girl I cannot bear to touch or speak to!"

"She does not know *you*, dear. Did you let her understand that you had overheard what she said?"

"Yes; I went straight into the room, meaning to make some heroic speech, but dear Miss Erlridge's warning eyes hindered me."

"Mrs. Ravey is an insolent woman."

"No, I do not suppose she is: she only speaks according to the feeling of a large class," answered Isabel, coldly scornful now.

"In this benighted old town."

"In any and every town. What amuses me is, that she spoke to me most graciously the other day, and then spoke of me as a most lady-like, charming girl—or something of that kind—taking me for you. To-day, under the same delusion, she asked an introduction. I did enjoy saying, 'I am Isabel Wold!'"

"That was capital! But you know, Isabel, you are very lady-like, and very clever, and very pretty, too; and you need not mind any of Mrs. Ravey's foolish speeches."

"I hope I am too proud for a Mrs. Ravey to have power to annoy me more than the sting of a tiresome insect might! I am myself in spite of her!—she cannot lower me in my own eyes."

"She cannot lower you in God's eyes, say rather, my dear Isabel!" Miss Erlridge's tremulous hand was laid softly on the girl's shoulder. "I am sorry you should have heard anything so disagreeable to you, my love," she continued. "Go

now and put on your bonnet; the other young ladies are ready for their walk."

Miss Erlridge glided away again.

"That tiresome promenade as usual, and that Miss Wilson to walk with us, I suppose!" Clara sighed.

"I suppose! I am glad we shall not have to exhibit ourselves there much longer; it is detestable."

"If Miss Erlridge knew how and why we dislike it, we should be allowed to go somewhere else."

"I would sooner endure it than complain: poor Miss Erlridge looks sadly worried. Besides, being stared at does not really harm one: we can despise the people who stare, for their want of good breeding."

"When you are talking to me I don't even notice it. But, Isabel, isn't it strange that any girl should like to attract such notice?"

"Very; but girls are very strange beings, some of them," Isabel said.

When the flock of young ladies were marshalled in the hall, Miss Erlridge appeared there to request that Miss Wold and Miss Blanchard would kindly remain behind to accompany herself. The others departed under the surveillance of Miss Wilson, who thought it good for the school that the girls should be paraded in public places.

"I am glad you are quietly dressed, my dears, for I am going among poor people," Miss Erlridge said, glancing at the dresses and cloaks of one subdued colour, and at the plain bonnets which enclosed the faces of the two flowers of her flock—so she felt them to be, though she strove never to show her partiality. I chose you to-day to walk with me because I am to lose you both so soon," she added, almost apologetically.

They each slid a hand upon her arm as they went out of the square, and turned into the poor quarter of the own.

"I hope, Isabel, that when you have left school, and have leisure, you will interest yourself about some of my poor friends," Miss Erlridge said, as, after she had paid her visits, she and her pupils sauntered about the river-side meadows, in those suburbs which, "pleasaunte and beauteous," found favour of old in the eyes of a king.

"I wish I were your daughter!" was Isabel's apparently irrelevant reply.

A faint flush mantled on Miss Erlridge's face.

"It is pleasant to me that you should feel such a wish.—But you evade answering my remark."

"Because I didn't like to say I should not do as you wish; but I do not think I shall."

"Why not? You will have a great deal of leisure, I imagine. Your father does not expect to receive any assistance from you in his business, and you have no young brothers and sisters to occupy your time and thoughts."

"Clara will be the fair Ladye Bountiful."

"Clara will not live here."

"You need not fear my wanting occupation, dear Miss Erlridge. I mean to study very hard indeed for a year or two—music and German, and Italian literature especially. I have planned a most studious life for myself."

"That is all very well. It would be very ungoverness-like of me to discourage such a resolution, wouldn't it? I hope that Clara will persevere with many of her studies."

"Clara feels she is a sad dunce, and is sorry to leave you so soon. If Isabel helps me I shall still get on, not unless."

"We are not likely to be thrown together at all, after this one visit which I have promised to make you. I have told you so several times, Clara!" Isabel said.

"Yes, and you speak of this one visit as if it were something you were going to *endure* to humour me! Why should we not be thrown together, Miss Erlridge? Why can't we throw ourselves together?"

"For the same reasons that Miss Erlridge does not care that *I* should educate myself more highly, but hopes that *you* will. I am a tradesman's daughter—you a gentleman's," Isabel answered, quickly.

"My father and mother are not a Mr. and Mrs. Ravy!" Clara said, indignantly.

"Hush, children! Isabel, you were a little unjust in your hasty judgment. You know, and so does Clara, how different your attainments are; you are so very much in advance of her."

"Of course she is—she is very clever," Clara said, "and has worked so hard!"

"I should be sorry that you, Isabel, should retrograde in any way," Miss Erlridge continued; "but you say you do not intend to be a governess or an authoress (I know there is no necessity for your being the former). Now a woman, I think, should have all faculties harmoniously developed; and I believe that your intellect does not need much conscious

culture now. Some day I hope to see you a happy wife and mother; till that time comes I think you should cultivate affectionateness in every possible way. I do not think you will be the happier for educating yourself very much more highly than those among whom you are likely to live. I feel this little hand twitching impatiently. Say to me anything you please, my dear."

"First, you will *not* see me a happy wife and mother, because any one I would marry would not think of me; any one who is likely to think of me, I should not marry. I see you smile; but we shall see if I am not right! Then—about educating myself beyond those with whom I live—I think it right that I should educate myself up to my extreme capability; whether I shall have the energy and perseverance to do so, is another thing,—I believe that—'Die Schranken unserer Kraft sind unsere Gesetze' in this matter, at all events; such talents as I have are certainly God's gifts."

"He also calls you unto a certain station, Isabel."

"As to externals—yes! I won't urge papa to keep a coach-and-six, or do anything unbecoming that 'certain station.' But I will not have my mind fettered; I will not believe that *that* has any certain station appointed it. I will try and fit myself for any position."

"Who knows that she may not be a duchess some day?" Clara said, laughing, yet full of confidence in the possibility of such a destiny for her friend.

"That is nonsense, Clara! I am no beggar-maid who would thankfully submit to be raised to high degree; nor do such things happen now-a-days. Besides, I would rather have the mind of some washerwomen than of some duchesses."

"Yes, but you mean to have the mind that will fit you for any station, even the most exalted."

"That is, a lowly mind. 'The meek shall inherit the earth,'" Miss Erlridge said, very softly. "Isabel, I love you much, and I fear for you much. I hope, my child, that you will always give me your confidence. I do not like the spirit in which you will begin your woman's life; it is not one that will conduce to your happiness. We will speak of these things again, love."

"I do not fear for myself," Isabel said, raising her eyes towards the Cathedral tower, which, glorified in golden sunshine, rose high above the level of these low meadows. "I do not expect a happy life, but ——" Tears dimmed the half-

defiant eyes—young hearts cannot calmly contemplate the prospect of life without happiness.

"It is striking six!" Clara exclaimed.

"We must hasten, then, my dears, or we shall be late for tea, and Miss Wilson will be annoyed."

Miss Erlridge did make great haste. To be a quarter-of-an-hour late for any meal is a grave offence against school punctuality; and Miss Wilson was a strict disciplinarian.

CHAPTER II.

A WELCOME HOME.

ISABEL WOLD was to leave school a fortnight before the commencement of the midsummer holidays, that she might spend her nineteenth birthday at home, and remain there for a little while before setting out on her promised visit to Miss Blanchard's family.

Clara was Isabel's only friend among her many companions.

Isabel's keenest regrets were lavished upon the drawing-room piano, which had been her good friend always, and, more than any living thing, the confidant of many a pain and passion,—ay, and triumph; for the young girl had achieved glorious triumphs in the world of this school. It was a fine instrument, too; she had had a voice in its selection, so felt somewhat of the pride of ownership in it. The evening on which she was to leave Castle Square, she sat at the piano playing, waiting for some one to come to accompany her home. The sun at setting glanced through the passion-vine, flecked her fair face and dark hair with dusky gold, and burned among Clara's warm-tinted tresses. Clara's head rested on Isabel's shoulder, and Clara's arms were round Isabel's waist.

Isabel played on till Clara said, "Leave off now, do, and take some notice of poor me! Remember we shall never be school-girls together again—never!"

Isabel broke off with some hasty chords; but they did not complete her melody satisfyingly, so she struck others, then turned to face her friend; as she did so, the glancing golden gleams strove to penetrate the depths of her violet eyes.

"What a sentimental tone, Clara!" she exclaimed. "I do not regret the past."

"People say that this time we are leaving behind us is the happiest of our lives! This evening I could almost believe

so, in spite of cross Miss Wilson, furious little Herr Vögel, and ——"

"*I* don't believe it!" Isabel said, with energy. "If I did I wouldn't care for life. Mere freedom from care must make the happiness of very low-minded people. I feel that I have grown beyond this wearisome routine, while its monotony has made my heart sick, often. But—" then came a reflective pause—"I do not precisely see how my change will satisfy me. Yet, at least, I shall be free!"

"That is more and less than I shall be. Mamma is as strict as Miss Erlridge; she will torment me about keeping up my music and drawing, and I'll do it, for I love her!"

"There, it is striking nine. See if my father does not come within five minutes. 'People of your class are obliged to practise that vulgar virtue punctuality,' so Julia Darrell said to me the other day."

"Isa! I don't like the look of you when you repeat the insolent speeches that ill-bred girls will make when they're angry."

"Ill-bred! the daughter of Sir Watkins Darrell?"

"Now don't look so at me."

"How?"

"As you looked at Julia when she said that; as if she were the meanest crawling reptile, and you only didn't crush her because you didn't wish to soil your shoe."

"I am always sorry when I let such speeches move me—it is doing the speakers too much honour."

"Yes, she was angry because you had been held up as an example to her by two masters in one day!—Now tell me, Isa, what am I to do this fortnight without you?" And Clara covered her friend's hand with kisses.

Isabel pressed one warm kiss on Clara's cheek, then said, her lip curving overmuch again,—"You will have the grand examination, or exhibition, to occupy you. Miss Wilson will be sure to make *you* play conspicuous parts."

"And no Isabel to help me! I shall break down."

"If you do so cleverly, the audience won't be any the wiser: but I will come and help you with that piece you have to practise."

"Thank you—now that *is* good of you!" More kisses were lavished upon the passive Isabel.

When a quarter-of-an-hour had passed, Mr. Wold had not appeared. Isabel grew impatient.

"I hope papa is not ill," she said twice within five minutes. At last a servant announced that Miss Wold was "fetched."

The gentleman was waiting in the other room.

"I may go in with you?" Clara asked, still clinging to her friend. "I like your papa so much!"

"Oh yes, come!" Isabel answered. "It is Richard, my brother," she explained to Clara, when they entered the dining-room.

After a hasty last embrace Clara withdrew—school-girlishly enough, covered with blushes, at having presented herself so unceremoniously before a handsome young man instead of the grave Mr. Wold. Miss Erlridge, too, had looked at her with surprise.

Richard Wold was a fine tall young fellow, and possessed somewhat of Isabel's refined detail of feature. He was the more decidedly handsome of the two. Her face had infinite variety of expression, rare delicacy of feature, and correctness of outline. Yet, at this period of her life, she seldom pleased at first sight; when people knew her well, they often expressed surprise that they had not sooner been struck with her beauty.

"A nice woman your Miss Erlridge seems," was Richard's first remark when they were in the square. Then he asked a question—"Who was the young lady that came into the room with you?"

"Miss Blanchard."

"What, your grand friend? I mean the one whose home you are going to?"

"Yes, I have promised to go home with her—when that visit is paid, our acquaintance will, I daresay, die out."

"She seems very fond of you, and looks pleasant and unassuming."

"I think she is—both."

"That Clara Blanchard!—I am surprised," repeated Richard, musingly.

"Why so?"

"I expected something so different from that blushing little girl."

"Ah!"

"I am almost sorry she is Miss Blanchard," Richard said, laughingly.

Isabel pressed closer to her brother, and began to talk of home-affairs.

It was moonlight now, and the ancient Castle street looked picturesque enough to please even fastidious Isabel, when they stood at their own door and looked down it. They paused before entering.

"The dim light slurs over some of the vulgar realities day stares at," Richard said.

Two young officers, not too steady in their gait, early as it was, sauntered past, apparently making Isabel the subject of remark,—of which she caught only the words—"Pretty girl," and "hosier's daughter."

Richard, who had not heard these words, wondered why she passed into the house so quickly, and followed her up the wide oak staircase. At the top of the first flight she found herself in her father's arms. His "Welcome home, my daughter?" made her forget all annoyance. Whatever he were, being still himself, she would wish to be no one else's daughter! So she thought then.

"And home does look nice!" she said, as she looked round the room into which she was led.

"Even a room over a shop may be beautiful," Richard remarked.

"Especially when the moonlight streamsin through the casements so poetically," his father added, smiling. "Now run up and take off your bonnet, Isabel, and then you shall pour out tea, and we shall feel certain that we really have you at home."

"For a fortnight," Richard suggested.

"For that fortnight we will be happy, and make the most of her."

When Isabel came down, she heard the name of Blanchard spoken by her father. Was Richard still thinking of pretty Clara, and questioning his father about the family? She did not ask. She so exerted herself that it was a very merry group which gathered round the table in the centre of that large, old, oaken-panelled room. The lamp shed its light on the three faces, each indisputably beautiful in its own way. That Richard and Isabel were children of his old age, Mr. Wold's whitening hair seemed to betoken; but the fire that could flash from his eyes, and the smoothness of his brow, gave the lie to that silvery symbol; sometimes he looked but little beyond the prime of life.

"Well, Richard, how is the voice? And have you practised industriously lately?" Isabel asked, when the tea-tray had been removed. "I have several duets you must learn to play with me."

"Oh? I haven't done much in the practising way: it is dull work by oneself, and young Engledew has been away. Papa and I have played chess every night."

"Papa must teach me chess. I want to learn."

"What is it you don't want to learn?" Richard asked, smiling.

"That crimson curtain between this room and my music-room is something new," Isabel said, crossing towards it. Her brother looked at Mr. Wold, then followed her with a light, and a joke about woman's curiosity, and drew back the curtain.

The father said, "You ought not to be allowed to go in there till to-morrow."

"A new piano—a grand piano! and the maker I like best! music—books. Oh, what a charming writing-table! My dear, dear papa! What a delightful room you have made for me!"

"You see," Mr. Wold began apologetically, I want you to feel comfortable at home, Isabel. I know that some things in your position will try you. You have your poor mother's pride, my child. If you sometimes meet with mortification out of doors, I want your home to be a pleasant place of refuge."

"Papa! papa!" Isabel said, softly, "I will try to be only proud of my father and brother, who are so good and so kind."

"Richard has arranged everything," Mr. Wold said, and Isabel turned her sparkling eyes upon him.

It was a charming room, oak-panelled like the larger one. The house had once been a nobleman's country mansion, though it was now one of a street in the heart of the town. The few Parian statuettes and vases that ornamented the mantel-piece, or were placed on brackets, showed exquisitely white against this dark background. The carpet and the cushions of the carved high-backed chairs were crimson; Isabel's favourite colour, as Richard had remembered.

Then a conservatory had been built out from this room; a very tiny one, but it was full of fragrant, flowering plants, and its coloured panes served to shut out an unpleasing view of smoky chimneys and crowding house-tops.

Mr. Wold was a prosperous man, yet the preparations that had been made for Isabel's reception were somewhat extravagant and "out of character," considering that she was

"only a tradesman's daughter." At least, Isabel believed that the poor Darrells, proud of birth, and the rich Raveys, proud of purse, would so consider them. But during this first evening at home, there was little else in her mind than delight and gratitude, which were evidenced in each word and look. More than ever, she disliked the prospect of visiting the Blanchards, at Burton Lacey, and regretted the promise that she had given Clara.

CHAPTER III.

ISABEL'S BIRTHDAY.

THE next day was Isabel's birthday. She woke very early and opened her small-paned casement, that she might the better watch the growing brightness of a bit of distant landscape which this window commanded.

It was still early when she went down into her own room, arrayed in a clean light dress. From her little conservatory she gathered for herself a bright-coloured and richly scented nosegay, of geraniums and heliotropes, to wear in her bosom. As she looked up from fastening it, she confronted herself reflected at full length in a long oak-framed mirror. She gravely scrutinised this figure, from the well-formed head, adorned by its abundant and gracefully arranged hair, to the small and neatly-fitted foot which peeped from beneath the folds of muslin. Her scrutiny was long and steady. Presently, she stepped nearer to the mirror, and, looking into her own eyes, said, "Remember that you are Isabel Wold, a shopkeeper's daughter, and have been taught that you will always be looked down upon by those whom you feel to be your equals, or inferiors." Then she turned away from her own haughty face to open the piano; her whole expression altered as she played.

Her playing soon brought her brother into the room—his arms were full of new books. Isabel left her piano to receive his good wishes on her birthday.

"Gifts for you," he said, piling the volumes on the table. "Complete editions of Göethe and Schiller. I hope we may have many pleasant evenings over them."

"You are magicians, you and papa," Isabel exclaimed. "I could not have thought of anything I should like better than these and the piano. Thank you a thousand times, Richard! Such beautiful editions," she said, bending over them, gleefully. "I have heard of these illustrations by Retzch. But it was too extravagant of you to get these for

me! Oh, we will enjoy our evenings with these dear old Germans. Herr Vögel has often told me that I *must* get editions of Göethe and Schiller."

"I am glad that I've been so fortunate as to please your ladyship," Richard answered, bowing. "Here comes papa: just home from his morning walk on the Wall."

"God bless my Isabel on this day and on all other days!" Mr. Wold said fervently, when he embraced his daughter.

They went to the breakfast table in the large room.

"Letters and a parcel, Ma'am," the servant announced.

While she set the urn, the eggs and the toast, down upon the table, she inspected her young mistress, for she was a new arrival, an additional servant who had been engaged on Isabel's account. "She's purty enough and proud enough for a queen," was the verdict Mary pronounced when she went down-stairs.

Isabel's letters were from Miss Erlridge and from Clara. The first she read, and then allowed her father and brother to read, but Clara's letter was kept to herself; the more determinately, as she fancied Richard looked wistfully at the sheet of delicately-inscribed, rose-tinted paper. The parcel contained a book, Miss Erlridge's parting gift and birthday gift to her well-beloved pupil, and a small morocco case from Clara, which, on being opened, disclosed a costly and fanciful ornament to be worn in the hair.

"Naughty child! I shall scold her. Such a thing is no use to *me*,"—Isabel commented, and pushed the case from her: but her face kindled with pleasure when she read the inscription on the blank page of her book.

Richard took out the pretty bauble and thoughtfully examined its exquisite workmanship, perhaps finding some likeness between the gift and the giver.

Just then the servant opened the room door, and a boy entered, who paused with such a look of almost stupid astonishment on seeing Miss Wold, that Mary the maid retired laughing.

Mr. Wold,—and Richard, when he had carefully replaced Isabel's ornament,—welcomed the new comer very cordially. "My daughter—Isabel, my young friend, Leigh Engledew. Isabel only came home yesterday. And when did you return?"

"Yesterday." The boy bashfully acknowledged Isabel's greeting; which—save that she did not offer him her hand,

she being always slow to do that—was very gracious, for she had heard of young Engledew as a musical genius, and for genius of any kind, Isabel had, of course, an exalted respect.

Leigh Engledew having subsided into a chair, applied himself with serious devotion to his breakfast. Isabel could notice him without alarming him, now he was so deeply occupied.

He was not at all her ideal of a genius, or a musician; he was tall and big, somewhat uncouth-looking, and dressed carelessly in ill-fitting clothes. His long, light hair looked as if it seldom saw comb or brush; and the hand which received a cup from hers, had such an unrefined appearance, from its not being *too* clean, that she shrank from contact with it.

"Leigh chose your piano in London for us, Isabel!" Richard remarked. Leigh looked up, and meeting Isabel's eyes, reddened; then drank a cup of tea so hastily that he nearly choked himself.

Isabel waited till he had quite recovered, then said—

"I like it very much, indeed. It is by far the finest piano I have ever played on!" After that polite speech, which received no intelligible reply, Isabel took no more notice of the boy, but talked to her father. She had so far forgotten Leigh's presence, that when he made some remark to Richard, in a deep, uncertain voice,—she started. Turning round, she saw that he was watching her observantly.

"Half-past nine!" Mr. Wold said, rising. "It is time I went down into the shop."

"I have opened the letters, father, and there is not much to attend to."

"Then you and Leigh will get an hour's practice, I suppose. And you, Isabel?—How are you going to keep your birthday?"

"This morning I must go to Castle Square; I promised to help Miss Blanchard with her music."

"Go soon then, or you will find it very warm. Good-bye for the present!"

"Good-bye, papa! I wish you hadn't to spend this beautiful day in that musty shop."

Isabel soon went into the music-room, where Richard and Leigh were. Leigh, in a stumbling, striving way, was expressing his admiration of a little-known work of a great composer, which he had lately heard performed. He broke

down when he saw Isabel leaning against the curtain in the door-way, and listening to him.

"You remember some parts, I daresay?" Isabel remarked. —" Play then."

Leigh swept back his hair from his brow and frowned.

"Try! a lady commands!" Richard said, pushing his friend to the piano unceremoniously. "What's the use of trying to describe the music—you can't talk, Leigh."

"But I mean to learn to talk," answered Leigh; "I won't be conquered."

He sat before the piano; but it was a long time before he struck a note. Presently his brow cleared, and a new soul seemed to animate the awkward body.

As he crashed out some grand chords he raised his head, and Isabel saw a bright light flash from his eyes. He played one movement after another, almost without a pause, as they returned to him. "What a glorious memory you have!" Richard exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"Why, when one takes music into one's soul, you see, the difficulty is to forget it!" Leigh replied, rising and speedily becoming shy and awkward again.

Isabel's cheek had been white and red by turns, as she listened, and now her eyelashes were wet. She said, "Thank you!" and went away. She did not return till after Richard's lesson, or practising, was over. She just ran against Leigh, as he was leaving the room, and he consequently retired, covered with confusion. Richard came back to his sister, to hear what she thought of his friend.

"A strange animal! how old is he?" Isabel asked.

"Just eighteen! Isn't he a young giant and genius?"

"A giant at least; a genius, too, I suppose. He played gloriously; but how very uncouth he is!"

"I love that young fellow, Isabel," Richard answered. "I am sure you will like him, all in good time, when you get over his awkwardness. He is so simple-hearted — so thoroughly original—such an enthusiast! He is no mere musician either; but a deep thinker on many topics."

"He might keep his hands clean, Richard. I shall have to wash the keys of the piano before I play."

"My dainty sister, you should have been born a lady!" Richard said, laughing at Isabel's look of disgust.

"I *was* born a lady."

"I think it well, good Madam! Do not slay me with your scornful glances. I meant a titled lady—Lady Isabel ——

How shall we fill up the blank? Perhaps you will teach me some day."

"Do not talk so absurdly, Richard."

"I stand reproved; it is talking absurdly," Richard answered, gravely. "Adieu to music and Lady Isabel for the present! and now for the counting-house and *shop*."

"Ah! you sigh, Richard. Do you remember, when you left school, how I urged you to fix upon some profession—to choose some pursuit that would be congenial to your tastes ——"

"Yes, you were a proud little chit even then."

"You waited and talked, and couldn't decide, and so took the easiest thing that offered."

"And the one most *right*. My father wished me to decide as I did, though he left me free of choice."

"But don't you regret your choice?"

"Only in my foolish moments. In my best and wisest I rejoice in it. I didn't want a profession to live for. I have no one particular talent. I need some pursuit to live by. I am now in an independent position, owing nothing to patronage, expecting nothing from it; and I might marry to-morrow without imprudence."

"Marry!"

"Ay! Why that scornful accent? Had I chosen a profession, as you wished, I might have laboured hard for ten years yet, and then have had no more than a distant prospect of being in a position which I would ask any woman I loved to share. It is arrant folly for men with no bias of special talent to choose to starve in a profession, because a profession is more 'genteel!'"

"Are you in love, Richard?" Isabel asked.

"No, Isabel."

"It seems to me that when you talk of marrying, you overlook one rather important thing—the difficulty of finding a wife: we are shut out from society we might care for, and don't care for that which is open to us. I don't well see where 'my brother's wife' is to come from!"

"I am a firm believer in the 'marriages made in heaven' theory. The 'lady I am to love' lurks somewhere. However, I own the existence of the difficulty you state; but I believe it is one that will lessen yearly."

"How?"

"Most fictions are founded upon fact—prejudices don't spring quite out of nothing. It is the trading-classes them-

selves who must remove the barrier set between them and the 'gentry'—live down the stigma attaching to them."

"How? I say again."

"By doing as our father does—educating their children, and showing themselves to be independent and truly respectable—removing distinctions that really existed, and proving others to be merely imaginary."

"Easy to do, when so many schools are open to 'children of the nobility and gentry' only. When ——"

"Gently! I grant there are difficulties, but they lessen almost daily, Isabel."

"I do not think it; my experience goes against your theory."

"Forgive me if I smile at your experience."

"You may smile. I have smiled while my spirit wept tears of bitterness and—hate," Isabel said, excitedly.

"Isabel! I do not like that look. Come, it is your birthday—we must not quarrel, or get upon dangerous subjects." He added, smiling, "I hope the 'lady I am to love' won't look at me in the manner you did just now. By-the-bye, you said you were going to Castle Square—shall I walk there with you? I can be spared long enough for that, I daresay."

"I am not ready yet."

"Look into the counting-house when you are."

"No. I will send Mary to call you, if you wish to go with me, but I must get used to walking by myself."

Isabel sat idle awhile when Richard left her—gazing out of the window into the street, watching, without noticing, the passers-by.

"Brother, you may suffer from what you make so light of!" she thought, and determined that Richard and Clara should not meet again if she could help it.

She tried to hurry him off when they stood at Miss Erlridge's door; but he loitered till it was opened, and then it chanced that Clara was just crossing the hall with her music-books. She saw Isabel and Isabel's brother was hidden by the door, so she came springing into her friend's arms to wish a thousand "happy returns" of her birthday. She blushed again most charmingly, when she saw Richard, who bowed reverentially and turned away—wondering among other things, how Isabel could receive such warm embraces so carelessly.

When Richard passed from the sunny street into the dark

old shop, the realities of his daily toil seemed meaner, dingièr, harder than usual.

In turning over some dainty lady's gloves, selecting a pair for Isabel, he thought they looked all too large for the pretty hand he had seen thrown round his sister's neck.

He was mistaken, though. Isabel's hand was smaller and better formed than Clara Blanchard's: very likely he had never particularly noticed it.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. BLANCHARD.

ISABEL was a steady friend, though not a very demonstrative one.

For nearly a fortnight she went to Castle Square every day, to superintend Miss Blanchard's preparations for the Exhibition, as she termed the yearly examination, and she, for many reasons, disliked going to Castle Square, now that Miss Erlridge was so occupied as to have no time to spare for her.

On the morning of the dreaded "Examination-day," Isabel found Clara suffering from a fresh access of nervousness about her part in the evening's performance.

"Don't care for any of the people—despise them for a set of know-nothings, which I daresay they are," was Isabel's advice to Clara. "Do your best," she continued, "just out of respect for yourself and for the music you are playing, or the poetry that you are saying—but don't care for any of the people!"

"Miss Wilson has just frightened me more than ever about my playing. She says that a very talented musician, a Mr. Leigh Engledew, will be here in the evening. Now it is bad enough to have to play before one's masters—why are you smiling, Isabel?" Clara asked.

"Only at your fright about Mr. Engledew—he is just a great awkward boy of eighteen—a genius in music, certainly, but the last person to be afraid of."

"I am glad that he is not so very dreadful—how came you to know him?"

"He is at our house nearly every day—he is a kind of connection of some relations of ours, and he gives Richard music lessons."

"Does your brother play then? How odd!"

"Why odd?"

"Gentlemen don't often play the piano, especially ——"

"When they are *not* gentlemen, but shopkeepers."

"You know, Isa., that I was not going to say that. I am sure your brother looks like a gentleman."

"I believe he does. Now, Clara, go on, play this passage again; just mark the time sharply, then you'll manage it."

The music received their undivided attention for a time.

"I must go now," Isabel said, at last; "I wish you well through the evening—I am sure that Miss Blanchard, of Burton Lacey, will excite much admiration. We meet at the station to-morrow afternoon, then I shall hear all about it."

"Then I shall have you again. I've missed you terribly, Isa. You don't care for me half as much as I do for you."

"I just love you, child! Won't that satisfy you?" Isabel said, putting her hand on Clara's shoulder, and looking into her face.

Clara laid her cheek upon the hand, and answered—

"Yes, I am satisfied when you speak so, Isa." She went on with rather a troubled expression, "I heard from home to-day, and they say that they are looking forward to the pleasure of seeing you. Most likely papa is coming for me, and—only if papa seems cold and formal at first, please don't mind it, it is his way."

"Very well," Isabel answered; but all the loving sunshine left her face, and she hurried away to entertain no pleasing thoughts on her homeward walk.

Miss Blanchard got through the evening creditably, though she was not very clever or persevering, and had been much put forward by Miss Wilson.

There was a flutter of gratified vanity at her heart when she lay down on that eventful night. Miss Erlridge had kissed and praised her, Miss Wilson had spoken flatteringly to her; her parents would be satisfied with the report they would receive; Isabel, too, would be pleased, and—would Isabel's brother hear anything about it?

Clara Blanchard was only seventeen; though her truthful simplicity had kept her untainted from the boarding-school atmosphere, she had no doubt acquired by observation some little knowledge of the arts of coquetry. Yet she had certainly never practised any such arts; from the first she had attached herself to Isabel, and had been taken under Isabel's protection.

Isabel's high-mindedness and exaggerated self-respect had kept her apart from all the petty deceits and intrigues practised in this, as in every large school, as ignorant of most of them as Miss Erlridge herself, so that her friendship had

been a very great safeguard to Clara. Grateful little Clara felt this, and had not allowed her parents to remain ignorant of how very much she thought that she owed to Isabel Wold. So it came about, that Isabel had been honoured by a pressing invitation to become a guest at Burton Lacey—an invitation which her friend's most earnest and loving entreaties had hardly prevailed upon her to accept.

Both Mr. Wold and Richard accompanied Isabel to the station next day. They were early, but had not been there many minutes, before they saw Clara's radiant face, which laughably contradicted the demureness and deliberation of the pace at which she advanced towards them, restrained by the arm of an elderly gentleman, of a generally formal, feeble, and washed-out appearance—her father.

Isabel had seen Mr. Blanchard before, so she introduced her father and brother to him. She was rather surprised at the cordiality of his manner towards them.

"I am very happy to become personally acquainted with one who has long been known to me by name. One cannot interest oneself in—in the public affairs of Caiston, without often hearing that name." Mr. Blanchard's smile, meant to be gracious, was rather uneasy. He continued: "Mrs. Blanchard and I hope, while entertaining Miss Wold at Burton Lacey, to show our sense of the obligations which our little girl tells us she is under to your accomplished daughter." Here he bowed to Isabel.

"I am obliged to you," Mr. Wold said. "I assure you we make a sacrifice in sparing Isabel so soon."

"I can believe that," Mr. Blanchard answered; nevertheless, he looked a little of his astonishment that the privilege of being a guest at Burton Lacey was not more highly appreciated.

Here Miss Blanchard dropped her glove, which Richard had the good fortune to pick up. As Clara received it with a smiling "thank you," Mr. Blanchard's light, cold eyes fixed themselves upon the young man.

"Is your son in—in your business?" he asked Mr. Wold.

"He is my partner."

"Ah! a very pleasant arrangement—very much so—far more sensible than bringing him up to a profession, my dear Sir, as so many in your—your position now do."

"The professions have their advantages and disadvantages. I left Richard free of choice," Mr. Wold answered, dryly.

"And he chose well. By-the-bye, there is a matter that I should much like to talk over with you. Will you spend next Sunday with us at Burton Lacey?"

"Your train, I believe.—Thank you, no—you must excuse my coming. My son and I always spend our Sundays in the country together, when Isabel is from home."

"This will only be a longer excursion than usual. Bring your son with you.—(There is room in this carriage, I perceive.)—We shall quite expect you."

Mr. Blanchard ceremoniously handed in the ladies, then seated himself opposite them. He leant out of the window as the train began to move, waved his hand, and repeated, "We shall quite expect you!"

Then his face stiffened, showing how elaborately assumed its graciousness had been; he removed his hat, put on a travelling-cap, and unfolded the "Times." Looking up, after a while, from its perusal, he encountered Isabel's eyes fixed on him with an observant, penetrating gaze. His uncandid glance slid off her face swiftly; he turned to the window, and began to show Miss Wold the attention of pointing out the gentlemen's seats they passed, and naming their owners.

"Here, through the trees, you may just discern Alderton House, the seat of Sir Watkins Darrall. Was not Miss Darrall a schoolfellow of yours, Miss Wold?"

"Yes, and a horrid girl she is," Clara answered, energetically.

"Do not express yourself so vehemently, my dear; such strong expressions are most unladylike. The Darralls are a very ancient family, Miss Wold, and Sir Watkins is a very old friend of mine. Here we are at Alderton Park station. It was a most fortunate thing for the Alderton family that the company carried their line this side of the forest."

"Yes, but the other was the more direct route, was it not?" asked Isabel.

"For the townspeople I believe it might have been; but it would have been most inconvenient for many of the county families. Poor old Sir Watkins has had a good deal of trouble; his eldest son has not been satisfactory. He is trying to get into Parliament now, and, it is hoped, is about to reform. He has fair talents, and may yet serve the country. Fair talents and many good points."

"Wouldn't it have been as well if he had reformed before he tried to get into Parliament?" Isabel asked, with assumed naïvete.

"Why—ahem! perhaps." After one sharp glance at Isabel, Mr. Blanchard's eyes fell upon his paper, which he perused busily for the next hour or two.

Isabel sank back into her corner with a feeling of relief. Clara clasped her friend's hand under cover of her shawl, and sat quiet, thinking of her mamma, and the many delights of coming home.

The country through which they passed looked very lovely, as the sun sank lower, and the shadows of tall elms in the hedgerows lengthened, till they stretched right across the bright newly-mown fields. They flew on and on, ever and anon coming upon some wooded valley, through which the placid river wound. Isabel gazed out steadily—her eyes swimming in tearful light—very sweet her proud face could look!

"Stand up, Miss Wold!" Mr. Blanchard exclaimed, suddenly ruffling Isabel's quiet enjoyment. "There! that is Burton Lacey! It is well situated, you see; commands the country, and, on one side, a beautiful bay."

"It is finely situated," Isabel said; then sat down again without showing any of the enthusiasm Mr. Blanchard had apparently expected.

"Is mamma watching from my window, I wonder?" Clara said.

To-day those words woke aching pain at Isabel's heart: she could hardly keep from shedding tears.

At the Burton Lacey station the Burton Lacey carriage waited to receive the travellers.

"Your mamma was not very well yesterday, or she would have come down," Mr. Blanchard said to Clara. During the ride he related to Isabel how, not long since, he had discovered and rectified an error in the family bearings, and how indebted the Blanchards of Somerset felt to him for having done so. He talked pompously and hesitatingly, and his listener's attention often wandered.

CHAPTER V.

AT BURTON LACEY.

BURTON LACEY stood on very high ground. After winding for a long way between trees, principally small oak and ash and taller birch, beneath which was a luxuriant growth of fern and heather, the carriage stopped before a large house, which looked grey and dull, and did not at all impress Isabel, whose imagination was apt to depict pictures that mocked reality. But her attention was at once turned towards a lady who, at the carriage-door, almost before it stopped, gave Clara a welcome home, such as Mr. Wold had given Isabel. Mrs. Blanchard was rather stout, and of a fresh, clear complexion. She had beautiful teeth and sunny-brown eyes, like Clara's. She held her daughter in a long, close embrace. Isabel forgot that she herself had remained unnoticed, till she heard Mr. Blanchard say, in a voice of warning—

"Mrs. Blanchard, my dear! Miss Wold!"

Mrs. Blanchard kissed Isabel's cheek, bade her welcome to Burton Lacey, and drew the two girls into the house with her.

The hall was very large and handsome; they went quickly across it into the drawing-room, which ran almost the whole length of the house, having a range of long windows facing south, and a great bay-window looking towards the west. It was a fine room; and everything in it now glowed in the rich light of a midsummer evening. This apartment pleased Isabel. While Clara received intelligence about Percy, Greville, Walter, Henry, and others for whom she inquired, Isabel went to the bay-window and looked out—across a broad paved walk, and a lawn gemmed with trim and bright-coloured flower-beds, to another walk bounded by a very low wall, quite covered with flowering-myrtles and fuschias; beyond this she saw far-stretching tree-tops, and in the distance the sea. A gentleman, who mounted a flight of steps, while she looked out, seemed to emerge from among the

crowding tree-tops. He sauntered across the lawn, looked at Isabel, standing so still in the drawing-room window, then quickened his steps.

"There is Percy!" Clara exclaimed, and rushed out of an open window to speak to him.

"My eldest son, Miss Wold," Mrs. Blanchard said, when, after condescendingly receiving his sister's caresses, the young man entered the room. He acknowledged the introduction slightly, and asked when dinner would be ready.

"Oh! almost immediately, now your father's come. My dears, you won't be long dressing. We are quite alone to-day, you know, Clara. Percy, ring for Matilda to show them their rooms. I can't run up-stairs as well as I used, Clara, and I must go to your papa." Mrs. Blanchard did not look strong, now that her bright colour had faded.

"Mustn't I go into the nursery now, mamma?" Clara asked.

"Rose and Ellen are out, my dear."

"I must wait then. Isabel's room is next mine, mamma, I suppose." And twining her arm round Isabel's waist, Clara was going off.

"No! my dear; that room would be wanted if we had company, you know. So, I thought your friend would feel more at home in the north room, as I hope she means to pay us a long visit."

The two girls went up the stairs,—Matilda, a smart lady's maid, following them.

"You must dress in my room to-day—I can't spare you, Isabel," Clara said—the truth being, as Isabel discerned, that she did not choose that her friend should occupy the somewhat small and dull room that had been prepared for her. Isabel did as she was requested without comment.

The two girls soon went down-stairs, both dressed in white muslin, and both wearing beautiful flowers taken from the well-filled vases in Clara's room. Clara's was a large and very pretty room, over the drawing-room; it opened on one side into a sitting-room that had been carefully furnished for her home-coming: but she did not stay to introduce Isabel to the comforts of her nest now, till she had secured a pleasanter apartment for her friend.

The other members of the family—two school-boys and a young man home from college—were now in the drawing-room. The entrance of the girls made a slight sensation. Mrs. Blanchard looked at them approvingly. Isabel was

soon enthroned on a sofa, her white muslin spreading over the dark green velvet on either side. Clara nestled up to her mother, praising everything that had been provided for herself, and, in a whisper, coaxing for a nicer room for her friend—using the unanswerable argument, that she was sure Isabel had a better room at home than the one which had been prepared for her here.

She had gained her point when dinner was announced. Mr. Blanchard had intended to give his arm to his wife, blandly observing "that Miss Wold would excuse ceremony;" —but he glanced at that young lady with those words on his lips, then offered her his arm, and bade Percy take his mother.

Isabel laughed inwardly as she passed into the dining-room; but her demeanour was extremely stately and dignified. She laughed because she had seen Mr. Blanchard's intention —to have defeated it was a triumph.

This was a precedent, too; every day of her stay, when there were no other visitors, she paced through the hall in the same solemn manner, resting the extreme tips of her fingers on her host's arm: this proceeding gave a tone to her standing in the house.

"Come and let us have a ramble, Isabel!" Clara exclaimed as soon as they were outside the dining-room door after dinner. "It was so warm and sleepy in there! and I want to show you all the prettiest places. If we are quick we shall see the moon rise over the trees, from the upper terrace."

"Put something on your heads, my dears; the dews will soon be falling," Mrs. Blanchard said, from the couch on which she had settled herself, when she saw them sallying forth through the drawing-room window. Clara laughingly obeyed to the letter by tying her laced handkerchief over her bright hair; but Isabel replied that she did not need anything.

"You have a very beautiful home, Clara," Isabel said, when they had gone through the upper gardens and stood on a terrace which ran high above one side of a square walled-in piece of ground, which was a very well of fragrance. Its lofty walls were covered with thickly-be-starred jasmine, and it was crowded with masses of close-flowered geraniums, heliotropes, verbenas, calceolarias and rarer plants.

"This is delicious!" Isabel exclaimed, leaning over the balustrade and looking down upon the varied sea of flowers, inhaling long breaths of fragrance.

"Isa," Clara said, "I have been thinking every time I looked at you to-day that you are just fit to be the mistress of some grand old place, some place far finer than this. Ah! you will be so some day—see if I am not a true prophet!"

There was a strange kindling of Isabel's face, still bent down over the garden wall.

"Little witch! little flatterer!—no one sees me with your eyes," she answered, shaking her head.

"I bide my time! see if some day I don't triumph! Come down these steps now. I want to take you to what will be our favourite place, I know. But there's the moon! Isn't she large and beautiful? Mounting up slowly, slowly. We must wait to see her quite above the trees."

The two girls paused arm-in-arm, standing upon the top-most step.

"See! she has disentangled herself from the tree-tops at last—mounts higher and higher," Isabel said.

They watched the moon's up-climbing awhile; then they descended to the fragrant walled garden, passed through a door in its opposite corner, went through wilder and less-cared for ground and part of a wood. At last they came upon a broad turfed terrace, commanding a splendid view; the country gradually sloping away from it to the distant bay, at one extremity of which stood an old castle.

"Yes, indeed! this will be a favourite spot, Clara. How very, very lovely, and the air is so fresh, right from the sea!"

"I knew you would like it; but we mustn't stay now. Mamma will fidget about our thin dresses, and the evening dew, and papa will want me to pour out tea. You will sing and play to-night, Isa? Greville is very fond of music; Greville is such a dear old fellow! You must."

"Must I?"

"Of course I mean if you will."

They went in; and Isabel did play and sing, and was complimented and admired so as almost to content Clara.

Leaning out of her window into the moonlight that night, Isabel formed the wise resolve that she would, as much as possible, forget her pride and sensitiveness for a time, and abandon herself to enjoyment of the glorious summer-time at beautiful Burton Lacey.

CHAPTER VI.

A RIDE.

"THAT friend of yours doesn't seem at all an agreeable young person, Clara!" Mr. Percy Blanchard said to his sister, as he stood beside her at the breakfast-room window next morning.

Clara's colour heightened immediately; but she didn't speak. The young man went on—"One would think, to see you two together, that *you* were the poor companion. You should just teach Miss Wold her place, Clara! What right has *she*, a shopkeeper's daughter, to be so haughty?"

"What do you mean, Percy? Isabel is my friend—more of a lady than you are of a gentleman, if you speak so. A poor companion! She came home with me because I love her and she loves me. Poor companion!" Clara repeated, indignantly.

"Don't fire up. If you love her, you must have queer taste, that's all I say; she seems to me to be a proud, disagreeable girl. What there is lovable or likeable about her I can't imagine! As for *her* loving *you*, I should not think she can love anybody."

"You know nothing about her, and do not understand her. If you gave her reason to like you, you'd find her a different being," Clara said, innocently.

"Pity, I'm going away to-morrow; the experiment might be amusing," Percy muttered, conceitedly settling his shirt-collar as he strolled away. In the hall he met Isabel just coming in from the garden. It was a lovely breezy morning; she looked bright and happy. Very beautiful too, he could not deny. He spoke to her about the fine weather and the view; and she answered him graciously, though carelessly.

"Greville, that's a pretty girl; when she smiles upon one, she looks charming!" Percy said to his student brother, who had just come down from the hills.

"She has not smiled upon me, so I can't say," was the dry answer.

"I am almost sorry I'm going away—she might bring some life into the house. A flirtation would make this place less of a bore."

"Miss Wold is too proud either to flirt, or be flirted with, I should imagine."

"You have noticed her, then!"

"I generally do notice people."

"You are not so much of a blind hermit as you seem, I believe."

"*I* believe that mamma is beckoning us in to breakfast," Greville answered.

Mrs. Blanchard, struck with Miss Wold's bright morning beauty, did not regret that her grown-up "boys" would be out of the way of its fascinations to-morrow. They were going to "do a tour" together—not very congenial companions—and the chance was, their routes would not long lie in the same direction.

Two little girls increased the family party at the breakfast-table.

"I have often heard of Rose and Ellen," Isabel said, as Clara brought them to kiss her.

"What wonderful graciousness!" Walter, one of the schoolboys commented, when, after a child's searching glance from each pair of blue eyes, the kisses were conceded without demur.

"Wonderful good taste," Percy murmured, *sotto voce*,—he had secured a seat beside Miss Wold.

Mrs. Blanchard, coming to her son's side after breakfast, asked him "if he were not going to the town presently?" He was lounging in a window, idly watching the party on the yet shady lawn,—Clara, Isabel, and the little girls, attended by Walter and Henry.

"I really don't know! it will be so confoundedly hot along the roads. I wonder if Clara would like to ride?" he added. "The down would be pleasant."

"I doubt if she will leave her friend this first morning."

"Miss Wold might have Greville's horse—it takes a side saddle very well," Percy said, with a sudden thought.

"You forget that Miss Wold is not likely to be a horsewoman; young women in her rank of life don't often ride."

"Ah! I'd wager something, though, *she* does; and very well she would look on horseback, too."

"It isn't worth while to say anything about it. You know the Darralls, and Mostyns, and a lot of people dine here to-day, and I don't want Clara to fatigue herself."

"There's no harm done by asking the question, mother, as you are sure Miss Wold doesn't ride."

So Percy Blanchard sauntered across the lawn to where Isabel sat; one of the children was on her lap, sticking grass and daisies into her hair.

"These children are troublesome, I'm afraid, Miss Wold," he observed.

"Not at all, Mr. Blanchard," Isabel answered, negligently, not even looking up to see who was the speaker.

"You are troublesome yourself, Sir; we don't want you," Henry exclaimed, nettled, because Percy's supercilious glance included him as one of the children. Isabel smiled on the last speaker, and her smile provoked Percy. "I suppose you don't ride, Miss Wold," he said.

"Oh, yes, she does?" Clara exclaimed; "she rides beautifully."

"Are you fond of riding?" he asked.

"Yes!" Isabel answered; and her eyes flashed out an amplification of this quiet assent, also some resentment of his assumption that the "hosier's daughter" could not ride; for so she read the manner of his first remark.

"Clara, don't you think we might have a canter on the down before it gets hot, and show Miss Wold the view? Henry or Walter might come too."

"It would be very pleasant," Clara said. "You've got your habit, Isa. Let us go and ask mamma about it."

"You needn't do that; I believe she's busy; and she knew I was coming to ask you," Percy answered, craftily.

So the girls went to dress, and Percy went to the stable to order their horses.

Mrs. Blanchard met them in the hall, as they came down equipped. A cloud of annoyance settled on her face.

"Clara, I was not aware you meant to ride. I didn't wish you to fatigue yourself to-day."

"Why, mamma, Percy said you knew that he was going to ask us."

"I did not suppose Miss Wold rode," Mrs. Blanchard said, in a low tone.

"Why should she not, I wonder? Just what Percy said," Clara pouted.

"Well, my child, as you are going, I hope you will find it

pleasant. Do not stay out long. Miss Wold, do not let them run away with you, my dear."

Isabel bowed haughtily; she had overheard Mrs. Blanchard's words. Two remarks of this kind within so short a time were too much for her philosophy. She was not like the Isabel of the hour before, till, after they had slowly ascended a steep stony lane, the wind leapt to meet them upon the wide moor, blowing their hair and feathers into wild confusion, and brightening their eyes and cheeks.

"Now, Clara! Now, Miss Wold!" Percy exclaimed; and off they set over the short turf. Clara and Walter, not so well mounted as the other two, were soon left behind.

"You are a true horsewoman," Percy remarked to Isabel, as they drew rein only at the edge of the down;—"Are you looking at the view? Fine—aw! yes, I'm really sorry that I shall not have the opportunity of—aw! Had I known of the attraction Burton Lacey would boast, I should have planned differently for this summer."—Percy looked hard at his companion to point the implied compliment.

"That would have been a pity," Isabel replied very gravely, her eyes intent on the distant landscape.

"I hope now, Miss Wold, you don't really think so," Percy said, bending towards her.

Isabel looked at him steadily, as she answered—"I do not know why you should doubt the sincerity of my simple observation, Mr. Blanchard." She spoke very haughtily; for she thought—"He thinks me a pretty plebeian, with whom he may amuse himself, and who will feel honoured by his notice."

Mr. Percy Blanchard resented her manner. He rode home by his sister's side, and manifested his displeasure by something very like incivility, in neglecting to help Isabel dismount, though Walter was hardly tall enough to do so, and similar ungentlemanly conduct.

"By the bye, Clara, what dress have you that is fit to wear to-night?" Mrs. Blanchard asked, as Isabel and Clara were about to leave the drawing-room to go up-stairs to dress.

"My lilac silk, mamma, and Isabel has a beautiful maize-coloured silk that looks very nicely with it."

"Who makes your dresses, Miss Wold, my dear? They fit you so well!"

"Miss Smith makes for all the girls at Miss Erlridge's," Clara replied. "But Isabel has such a nice figure, that is why her dresses look well."

"I know that Miss Smith makes for Julia Darrall, and that she never looks tolerable. I also know that Miss Clara Blanchard does not always look as well as she might," Mrs. Blanchard answered smiling.

"I shall look charming this evening, because Isabel will see that I am dressed all properly."

"Very kind of her!" Mrs. Blanchard said, absently. "I am sorry, my dear," she added, turning to Isabel—"that we are obliged to have all these people to-night. I daresay you would rather have been quiet."

"I don't see why! She isn't going to be a nun!" exclaimed Isabel's champion, impatient of any speech that implied a difference of Isabel's position from her own.

"You are right, Mrs. Blanchard; I would rather have been quiet while staying at Burton Lacey," Isabel answered.

When she and Clara were alone up-stairs, she said—

"You need not ask me to play or sing this evening, Clara. I will accompany you if you sing; but I will do nothing else." No entreaties availed to overcome this resolution.

"I say, how do you mean to manage about that Miss Wold?" Percy Blanchard asked his mother, when he sauntered into the drawing-room, having completed a very elaborate toilet. "You see she isn't the kind of girl one can hide in a corner; every one will be asking who she is."

"She is my daughter's friend," Mrs. Blanchard replied with dignity.

"That won't satisfy them—if she plays and makes herself agreeable, she may pass for the children's governess."

"You forget that she was a school-fellow of Miss Darrall's and of Miss Ravey's."

"Oh! Every one will be well informed who she is then —Julia Darrall has a tongue! I think it's—aw—considerably unpleasant, being mixed up with tradespeople in this manner. I shall take care not to approach or speak to Miss Wold, or ——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the two young ladies—as his eyes followed Isabel's stately progress up the long room, he thought that indeed she wasn't the sort of girl one can hide in a corner!

"Do you expect Long to-night?" Percy asked. "It will be awkward having him and Wilton Watkins—both candidates for Caiston."

"I believe Mr. Long will not be able to come."

"So much the better! We don't want him. I don't."

"I have a very great liking and respect for Reginald Long," said Mrs. Blanchard. "I cannot understand your prejudice against him."

"Reginald Long!" echoed Clara. "Oh, isn't he coming? I'm so sorry! I wanted Isabel to see him!"

"What a foolish child you are, Clara!" said her mother.

Percy went to the window where Isabel sat—irresistibly attracted towards her, though not forgiving her his repulse of the morning.

"Doesn't she look lovely?" Clara whispered gleefully to her mother, who she saw was carefully observing Isabel's dress, attitude, and demeanour—"That colour suits her exactly, and how pretty those red flowers in her hair are; such white shoulders she has,—hasn't she?"

"Hush! little madcap!" Mrs. Blanchard sighed as she looked at Isabel—she felt tenderly compassionate towards her. What was the use of all this beauty and superiority to the shopkeeper's daughter? And how could this girl ever be happy, whose pride was so much opposed to her position?

Isabel's face grew whiter, her eyes darker, as, in the drawing-room after dinner, she sat, or stood apart, feeling herself cut off from intercourse with the gay throng around her—as it were, tabooed. Of course her pride exaggerated the extent of theirs. Yet, instead of feeling shy and unhappy, she was conscious that her heart beat high with a vague wild sense of power—almost of triumph. She did not understand why, or seek to do so.

Clara was obliged to play the hostess to the younger ladies; she was a little hurt that Isabel did not come to her aid, instead of keeping apart, watching every one with such a strange proud face.

"You seem to be throned in solitude. Do you despise society, Miss Wold?" Greville the student asked—entering the room presently, by a window near which Isabel sat.

"No! I do not pretend to despise things out of my reach —I will not cry 'sour grapes.'"

"You looked very disdainful, I thought."

"You must surely have been mistaken."

"Why?—and what did you mean about sour grapes?"

"If I had rank and influence it is possible I might hold them carelessly—till I have possessed them I will believe with the world that they are the highest good."

"The highest good!" echoed Greville gravely. But just

then he was called away by his mother. "A very strange girl!" he thought, as he left Isabel.

In the course of the evening Miss Darrall was, after much solicitation, led to the piano by Percy Blanchard. Carelessly tossing over her songs, she said, "Some one must play the accompaniment for me; my music master always did!"

The song she selected had a rather difficult accompaniment, which she wished played in a different key from the one in which it was written.

Clara could not manage it; nor could any of Miss Darrall's friends.

"Ask Isabel Wold—she can play it," the young lady said, reluctantly acknowledging her superiority. Clara was deaf to this request; Julia had chosen to-night to carry the vulgar spirit of her school animosity into her manner of meeting Isabel, and Clara wondered that she could now ask a favour of her. Percy begged Isabel, in a very flowery speech, to accompany a lady in a song. Isabel rose immediately and went to the piano, believing that Clara was going to sing: she sat down and played a few bars of the music which was open on the piano. "Play it quicker than that!" Miss Darrall said rudely.

"Are you going to sing this, Miss Darrall?" Isabel asked, taking her fingers off the keys, and looking up. "Then I must decline accompanying you—I only play for Miss Blanchard. I should but confuse you. We never could get on together."

There was a smile on several faces—Miss Darrall said she would manage it herself, and Isabel rose. The performance that ensued was painful; a sense of failure penetrated even through Julia's ignorance and conceit.

Isabel justified her refusal to herself by saying—"I could not break my word! I told Clara I would only play for her;" but she felt humiliated when Percy whispered confidentially—

"Capital! That just served her right for her insolence, Miss Wold?"

CHAPTER VII

AFTER DINNER.

"DO you think that we shall have the pleasure of seeing your father and brother on Saturday?" Mr. Blanchard asked Isabel, when he had taken leave of his sons, who left Burton Lacey the morning after the dinner-party.

"I do not know. Papa does not say in the letter I had this morning."

"If you are intending to write to him, may I trouble you to repeat my invitation, and to say that we are quite anticipating the pleasure of seeing him here?"

"I will do so," Isabel answered. Mr. Blanchard's suave and deliberate manner always inclined her to speak with much abruptness.

In her letter she repeated what Mr. Blanchard had said, without making any comment thereupon. She secretly hoped that Mr. Wold and Richard would not come; at all events, that Richard would not.

Isabel sat down in the drawing-room to write; Clara banished herself to the conservatory close by, because she could not be silent, and Isabel's letter did not progress while she was present.

"Here comes the irresistible Wilton Watkins," Clara cried, presently, looking in at the window. "Isn't he well got up? he beats Percy. Only Percy really is handsome, and Mr. Darrall is ugly."

"I can't see him from here, but I had that felicity last night, you know," Isabel said, negligently, without looking up from her letter; she was in the midst of a satirical description of yesterday's festivities, over which she often smiled.

Clara's laughing face was only just withdrawn from the window, when Mr. Darrall entered the drawing-room.

Though nearly thirty, the smallness of his stature, smooth-

ness of his face, and studied perfection of his costume made him seem almost boyish; but out of his deep-set eyes, looked a soul old in cunning and several varieties of vice. Isabel had marked him for her special aversion the previous evening, while she wondered at the cleverness of his glib talk. Clara had accidentally introduced her to him; after acknowledging the introduction as slightly as possible, he had turned from her most unceremoniously.

This morning, Isabel's bow, as she looked up when he was announced, was hardly perceptible; great was her surprise when Mr. Wilton Watkins Darrall saluted her with brisk affability, and strove to draw her into conversation. He had discovered since last night, that he had once been at a public school with a man of the name of Wold—"any relative of yours, Miss Wold?" he asked.

"My brother was at that school," Isabel answered.

"I shall be delighted to see him again, and to renew our acquaintance. My father and I are to have the pleasure of dining with Mr. Wold and your brother on Saturday, I believe."

"I think it very uncertain if my father and brother will come," Isabel said, not manifesting any of the surprise she felt.

"I shall be distressed; Mr. Blanchard spoke as if he certainly expected them; but then, between you and me. your worthy host has a most exalted opinion of the attractions of Burton Lacey." Not a word or the shadow of a smile from Isabel; so Mr. Darrall ran on. "Burton Lacey *is* a very pleasant place, certainly very much so. The view from this window, for instance, is charming. Ah! there is Miss Blanchard," he exclaimed, as Clara came in; then Mr. Blanchard appeared, and invited the visitor to accompany him to the library. Mr. Darrall bowed himself out, regretting, as he did so, that he had interrupted Miss Wold's correspondence for so long a time, and begging that, if it chanced that she was writing home, she would remember him to her brother, or, rather, remind her brother of their old acquaintance.

When they were gone, Clara clapped her hands and laughed.

"It was such fun watching you two. What were you talking about? Mr. Wilton Watkins was doing the agreeable so powerfully, and you looked—not daggers, but icicles."

"What does the man mean by it?" said Isabel, meditatively.

"Why, he is captivated, Isabel."

"Not in the least, you foolish child. Last night he turned from me very rudely: he has some reason for changing his manner: he expects to get something for his civility."

"Oh, Mr. Wilton Watkins Darrall is a candidate for Caiston, is he not?" Isabel asked, after a pause.

"I think so, but I don't bother about these things."

"Yes, I remember your father told me so; he is a candidate, and since last night he has heard that my father has some influence: that is it. I see it clearly now," Isabel said, and then continued her letter home.

Without giving any reasons, Mr. Wold accepted the invitation for himself and his son.

Mr. Blanchard drove to the station on Saturday afternoon, to meet the six o'clock train; he brought home Mr. Wold and Richard, and old Sir Watkins Darrall, who had come by the same train, from Alderton Park. Mr. Wilton Watkins rode across the country on horseback, and arrived earlier in the afternoon, hoping to have the opportunity of overcoming a little of Miss Wold's reserve, and of making a favourable impression upon her, for he deemed it advisable to enlist her sympathies in his cause, and thought that a little attention from him to one so far beneath him, would completely attain that end.

But Isabel and Clara were out in the woods; he went to meet them and missed them—they returned only just in time to dress for dinner, so Mr. Darrall had his long ride under the burning sun of a July afternoon for nothing. When the girls entered the drawing-room, the gentlemen were gathered in a group talking eagerly.

Mr. Wold's eyes kindled as they rested on his daughter—Richard's fixed themselves on Clara.

Greetings over, Isabel and Clara sat down by Mrs. Blanchard, who, busy at her fancy-work, took little heed of masculine and political talk.

The ladies withdrew directly after dinner. Isabel's face had brightened with pleasure and triumph, as she listened to the part her father bore in the conversation that was carried on. Mr. Wcld's uprightness, down-rightness, and stern independence of character, combined with a strong and clear

intellect, made him very formidable to clever, superficial, and loose-principled Mr. Wilton Watkins; to his muddle-headed, well-meaning, prejudiced father; and to shallow, formal, conventional Mr. Blanchard. "I am sure my father will not approve of Mr. Darrall or his principles. Sir Watkins will obtain nothing in return for his wonderful outlay of civility and affability," Isabel remarked to Clara when they were alone.

"I like to hear your father talk. I can understand what he means. I lose myself if I try to understand Sir Watkins — he plunges into perplexities and never comes out. And your brother is quite as sensible as your papa, I should think. And *how* fond of you they both are, Isa."

"Who is Reginald Long?" Isabel asked. "I have heard the name so often. Reginald is an uncommon name."

"I can't tell you exactly who he is. Moor Hall belongs to him; his mother was my mother's very best friend, but she has been dead many years. I wish he had been here the other night, for I am sure you would like him, and so would your papa. In everything he is just the opposite of that snake-eyed little Wilton Watkins."

"That is saying much in his favour!"

"Yes.—It will be ever so long before they come in to tea. Let us go down on the terrace. Mamma is gone up to her own room."

"Mr. Long is a candidate for Caiston, too—is he not?"

"Yes, and there will be a struggle between him and Sir Wilton, two Liberals—the Tory member being sure of his election."

Richard Wold came into the drawing-room just as the girls were going out.

"I left the gentlemen in the hope that I might get some music," he said. "Engledew has gone to London again, Isabel, and I have heard none since you left."

"We were just going out. There will be time for music afterwards; it is too lovely to stay indoors now."

"It does look beautiful with this dusky red-gold light slanting on the tree-tops! I should be sorry to keep you in the house."

"We can show your brother our favourite walk, Isabel!" said Clara, and led the way out of the window; so Richard found himself strolling about the grounds and pacing up and

down the terrace with his sister and her friend during the witching time of sunset and twilight.

How handsome he looked! his whole face expressing deep, quiet, enjoyment of the scene and of his position. But Isabel was not nearly so much at ease; she could not quite forget her pride or prudence. Richard and Clara were far too friendly.

"Doesn't the heather look a very different colour by the light?" said Clara, stooping to pick a spray from the bank at the side of the terrace. She held it towards Isabel. But Richard took it—"Yes! it has caught and imprisoned the glow of the coloured twilight," he said. He kept the spray of heather, Clara noticing that he did so.

Both Richard and Clara coloured when their eyes next met. He blushed at his own audacity—she with surprise, pleasure, she hardly knew what—she was but a child.

"How every late it is!" Isabel exclaimed, as the clock of the distant castle told half-past nine.

Richard and Clara were surprised—the former incredulous till he had consulted his watch by the failing light. Then they hastened in-doors—Isabel's apprehensions as to how Mrs. Blanchard might receive them were unpleasant.

Mrs. Blanchard was alone in the drawing-room, reading by lamp-light. "You are naughty, imprudent girls!" she said, kindly.

But when Richard Wold stepped into the room after them, her look and tone completely changed. "I thought Mr. Richard Wold was in the dining-room," she said, coldly. Richard tried to enter into conversation with her, spoke of the beauty of the situation of Burton Lacey, the warmth and pleasantness of the evening, and so on; but the more pleasing and handsome he looked, the more thoroughly a gentleman he showed himself to be, the less Mrs. Blanchard appeared inclined to be gracious. She would have patronised him benevolently had he been an awkward, timid uncultivated lad; he was completely the opposite, yet still was the young tradesman whom she could not possibly receive as an equal. No wonder it vexed her to find he had been strolling about with her young and unsophisticated daughter. Her displeasure extended to Isabel, to whom she mentally did great injustice, accusing her of trying to throw her brother and Miss Blanchard together. So the sometimes genial and

"nice" Mrs. Blanchard was formal and icy, and made the three young people thoroughly uncomfortable. It was a relief when the other gentlemen joined them. After tea and coffee had been served, Mr. Wilton Watkins Darrall entreated that Miss Blanchard and Miss Wold would favour them with music.

Her father and brother being present, Isabel exerted herself: she accompanied Clara, and then played and sang by herself. Mr. Wilton Watkins Darrall was perfectly enthusiastic—when she finished—"such a touch! such a voice!" he kept repeating.

Then, seeing Mrs. Blanchard's face, fancying she might be a little annoyed that Clara was so completely eclipsed, he remarked to her in a compassionate aside—

"Professional, I suppose, poor thing!"

"Oh no!" Mrs. Blanchard said.

"You surprise me!"

"Mr. Wold is wealthy for a man in his position; his daughter was educated at Miss Erlridge's, and has had the best masters."

"She is to draw a prize in the matrimonial lottery, then, I presume, and all eldest sons must beware of her syren-charmings."

Mrs. Blanchard replied, her fair matronliness resenting this speech, "The Wolds are honourable people—well-principled; proud, and independent to a fault—my husband has the greatest respect for them."

Mr. Darrall turned away to talk to Richard Wold. He tried to ingratiate himself with him by his affable revival of school-fellowship. Richard's reminiscences of the exploits of the youthful Wilton Watkins were not all greatly to the credit of that young gentleman; nor did he seem disposed to regard sundry transactions in the comic and indulgent light in which their hero presented them.

"A most impregnable unmanageable family! and we sha'n't do much good with them?" the young man pronounced, to his father, when, at a late hour, this refractory family had retired, and the two Darralls drew Mr. Blanchard into consultation.

"Patience, Wilton?" his father said, encouragingly. "You must call upon this Wold in his own den—pay him attention in Caiston. He's worth fighting for—I'm confidently informed that he has immense influence, much more than he uses."

"That's pleasant, for he won't use it on my side!"

"You don't know that, you don't know that! There's no telling what impression is made on these fellows, Mr. Blanchard;—they like to bluster, and seem independent, but ——" And old Sir Watkins made a significent gesture, meant to express his incredulity of the existence of honesty and disinterestedness in the world.

"I am ready to own, and lament to be forced to do so, that an honest man, that 'noblest work of God,' as the poet says, is rare; but I am by no means the sceptical Diogenes that you are on this point, my good Sir Watkins. In this free land of ours, where individual conviction is unfettered by oppression, and respected by ——"

"My dear Sir, you are not on the hustings!" broke in the baronet. Mr. Blanchard's pale face grew pink; but he smiled meekly. The three parted for the night on the best terms. Mr. Blanchard would put up with a good deal from his old friend Sir Watkins.

They were not a very congenial party to spend a Sunday in a country-house—business and politics being forbidden subjects on that day. But the early part of the day passed pleasantly for the Wolds; they did not accompany the family to church, to be inclosed in the splendour of the Burton Lacey pew, and to be illuminated by the coloured light falling through the gorgeous window which commemorated a deceased Blanchard and his works; but they had a quiet morning out in the open air on that pleasant terrace.

The four guests left Burton Lacey early on Monday morning. The Darralls were going to Caiston to improve their opportunities, though they were almost hopeless of enlisting Mr. Wold's sympathies, unless the other candidates should be still less to his mind. But they walked up the town with the hosier and his son, taking leave of them at their own shop-door, with a great demonstration of friendship, and expressing their intention of calling in in a day or two.

That evening on the terrace at Burton Lacey seemed like a beautiful and extravagant dream to Richard, when he stood again in the dingy old shop. Several times in the day he caught himself looking out into the glimmering August heat (he could catch a glimpse of distant trees and meadows through an opening in

the street opposite), lost in most unbusiness-like meditation.

"The house seems close to-night," Mr. Wold remarked, when they went up-stairs, the day's business over.

"And it is dull without Isabel. Shall we take a walk?"

Arm in arm father and son set out, leaving work-a-day life behind them — strolling by the river, through the meadows, late into the summer night.

CHAPTER VIII.

GENTLEMEN.

"I REALLY cannot see the necessity for your leaving us, Miss Wold. We value your society highly. Clara! no doubt you can prevail on your friend to favour Burton Lacey with her presence a little longer."—It was Mr. Blanchard who spoke, looking at Isabel with his most benign air.

"I have done all I could, papa," Clara answered, dejectedly.

"My dear Isabel, your returning for a month or so cannot be very important," Mrs. Blanchard said. "Your society is a pleasure to us all; and I really do not know what my poor Clara will do without you."

"You are all very kind," Isabel said; "but I have been here six weeks—much longer than I intended to stay—and papa and Richard want me."

"They did without you very well while you were at school, my love."

"I hope nobody will say anything more. I must go. I have been very happy here, and I shall be sorry to leave Clara, as she knows; but I ought to go home now," Isabel answered.

Clara went away from the breakfast-table in tears, and Isabel looked after her wistfully.

"Of course, she must get used to doing without you, Miss Wold, unless, indeed ——" Mr. Blanchard paused, and looked embarrassed.

Mrs. Blanchard gave him a warning glance, and slightly shook her head; but he resumed—

"It has occurred to me, my dear Miss Wold, as I have watched your beneficial influence upon our daughter, whose extreme simplicity and careless levity have at times given us uneasiness, and whose indolence of disposition interferes with her acquiring that proficiency in various accomplishments which—ahem!—her station demands from her: I say

it has occurred to me that possibly some arrangement might be made which would secure to our daughter, for a year or two longer, the advantages of your companionship—give our two youngest children the opportunity of commencing their education under the happiest auspices, and at the same time offer you a home and society more congenial to the refinement of your nature than—ahem!—that which your father, holding his present position, can afford you."

Isabel had listened attentively.—"Do you mean," she began slowly—

"Mr. Blanchard means that perhaps you would not have any objection to continuing with us for a couple of years, nominally as the children's governess, but really as Clara's friend—quite one of the family," Mrs. Blanchard broke in, hastily.

"I ought to feel gratified that you should wish it," Isabel began, looking anything but gratified.

"Do not decide hastily, my dear young lady—take a week to consider our offer," Mr. Blanchard said, deprecating Isabel's immediate reply by a gentle wave of his hand. "Submit our proposal to your father—he is a practical man—so you may as well mention that we should be happy to make our substantial recognition of your services handsome. But the consideration which I imagine will weigh with yourself will be that of the superior society in which you will move."

Isabel's eyes shot a queer glance upon the speaker; a bright red fixed itself upon her cheek. She answered—

"The society of my own father and brother is sufficiently refined to satisfy me, Mr. Blanchard. I am afraid I should hardly appreciate the advantage of being *tolerated* in higher circles. And though my father is a practical man, I think he will prefer keeping me at home."

"You do not, then, feel inclined to avail yourself of our wish to retain you in the family?" Mr. Blanchard questioned, rising with an uneasy expression on his face.

"I do not! I thank you for your proposal, in as far as you meant it kindly; but you have greatly misunderstood me if you fancied that I had any aspirations after association with those who would look down upon my real position, and perhaps insult my relations. The little society I have seen while staying here has not been so much to my taste that I feel inclined to occupy a dependent position in order to continue to enjoy it."

"Indeed! Well—ahem!—I am sorry I made an offer

which has received a somewhat haughty and ungracious rejection."

Mr. Blanchard left the room hastily.

Mrs. Blanchard still sat at the head of the table—Isabel beside her. Both remained silent some time: Mrs. Blanchard looked troubled.

"Was I haughty?" Isabel asked, presently. "I did not mean to be—you have been so kind; but I cannot bear anything like a reflection upon my father and brother.—Was I haughty?" And she looked up anxiously into Mrs. Blanchard's motherly face.

"It is your nature to be so, my poor child! I am sorry Mr. Blanchard said what he did. I tried to dissuade him. He often manages to offend people even when he means most kindly. And I felt sure you would not accept his offer."

"I ought not to have been offended. You think I was right in declining his flattering offer?"

"Yes, Isabel. Now go, my dear, and console poor Clara. We shall all miss you very much."

They both rose. Mrs. Blanchard met a soft, loving look from Isabel's eyes. She took her hand, drew her close, and kissed her tenderly—the mother compassionated this proud, motherless girl.

Isabel found it difficult to console Clara. She could not promise to come again soon, or to write often, not intending to do either, for she had determined gently and as kindly as possible to break off this intimacy—it being her resolution to have no friends with whom she and her father and brother did not associate as equals.

Isabel left Burton Lacey next day, as she had planned to do. Mr. Blanchard did not forgive her rejection of his splendid offer sufficiently to feel cordially towards her, but he was most scrupulously polite. He was the only person at Burton Lacey from whom Isabel parted without regret. For Clara and Mrs. Blanchard she entertained strong affection; and she felt more melancholy than she would have chosen to own when she caught the last view of Burton Lacey from the window of the first-class carriage into which she had been consigned with tears and kisses from Clara, and expressions of civility from Mr. Blanchard.

She checked the loquacity of an old lady, her nearest fellow-passenger, by her short replies, and then looked out of the window steadily, thinking over all that had occurred

since she left home. Afterwards it was passing strange to recall this her first visit to Burton Lacey.

On the platform at Alderton Park Station, when they arrived at it, stood Wilton Watkins Darrall, and two other young men after his kind. He peered into the carriage where Isabel sat, looked her in the face, with his glass screwed into his small eye, but did not bow or give her the slightest mark of recognition.

"My father has decidedly declined supporting him," Isabel commented inwardly. "A pity! he is so fine and true a gentleman!"

At the next station a gentleman of a different species got into the carriage in which Isabel was. He sat down by the window at the other end, regardfully avoiding to trample upon Isabel's dress, or the loquacious old lady's very numerous packages, as he made his way to his seat.

At the same station, a young man who had been one of the trio waiting at Alderton left his own carriage to get into this one. A sour-looking lady also bustled in just as they were starting, and began arranging her cloak in the place of the first comer, who happened to be leaning out of the window.

"That place is taken, Ma'am!" Mr. Darrall's friend said, settling himself in the other seat by the window as he spoke.

The gentleman withdrew his head from out of the window, and addressed the lady.

"You are perfectly welcome to this seat if you prefer the corner." And he smiled into the sour, plain face.

"On no account: I had no wish to usurp anyone's place," was answered sharply.

"Pray take it; a corner is pleasanter and more comfortable.—Allow me." And he folded her cloak for her, put his out of her way, and took a seat in the middle of the carriage.

Isabel looked on approvingly; her attention was excited. There was something singularly sweet in this gentleman's smile and voice. Withdrawing her eyes from a momentary inspection of the owner of these attractions, she met the fixed and determined stare of Mr. Darrall's friend. He had moved to a seat beside the loquacious lady almost opposite Isabel. Having, apparently, ascertained that Isabel was travelling alone, he continued to look at her frequently, and in a way that was evidently meant to annoy her. Spite of the haughtiness which made her wish to feel and to appear totally indifferent to this impertinence, Isabel grew very un-

comfortable, and resolved to change her carriage when next the train should stop. But presently, without a glance that could indicate why he did so, and serve to lay Isabel under an obligation, *the* gentleman took the vacant seat next her, leant forward, and widely-opened his paper, so that it completely screened Isabella from her tormentor—then continued to read composedly.—Isabel had a book, and she, too, read; it was one of her small volumes of Schiller, and she soon forgot both her quiet protector and the insignificant annoyer.

When the train stopped, and the young fool stumbled out with a parting stare at Isabel, she was surprised to see that they had almost reached Caiston. Her enemy returning for his glove, knocked her book out of her hand and threw down one of the old lady's packages. *The* gentleman restored both to their owner; he presented Isabel's book to her with a bow and a look that seemed to deprecate such rudeness: his eye kindled intelligently as he saw what she was reading. He would probably have entered into conversation with her had she been under the guardianship of a father, or brother, or mother; as it was, he remained silent. At Caiston he got out first, stopped to assist the old lady and her numerous effects; then he offered his hand to Isabel rather timidly: she gave one glance into his face as she accepted it. She did not see her father or brother at the first moment, and stood irresolute, to be pushed about by the bustling people. The gentleman—who, having also handed out the third lady, remained near—had just said, "Can I be of any assistance?" when Mr. Wold hurried up to Isabel. She had not had time to answer this offer of service. After speaking to her father she saw the gentleman already far off. She was sorry she had not said "Thank you." The face she had looked into was lighted by a pair of grey eyes, somewhat melancholy in their gentleness: she thought she should recognise them anywhere, as expressing a temperament one would most carefully shrink from painting.

"I was looking, from habit, into second-class carriages; that is why I did not see you sooner, Isabel," her father said.

"Could a guest from Burton Lacey depart in a second-class carriage? No! Forbid it—'all the blood of all the' Blanchards!" exclaimed Isabel, merrily.

"I suppose it would. In any case, it is best for you to travel first-class, child."

"And how is Richard, papa?" Isabel asked, as they left the station.

"Why, well," Mr. Wold answered, meditatively; "but not quite himself. We have wanted you badly, my dear; your brother is a little dull and absent."

They walked rapidly along the footway towards the town. Very soon they met Richard, and Isabel, between her father and brother, forgot all melancholy at having left beautiful Burton Lacey, and chattered merrily, according to the brightest mood of her "infinite variety."

"And what adventures have you met with all these long weeks?" Richard asked, as Isabel presided at the tea-table, which—made bright by beautiful flowers and old-fashioned silver, illuminated the late rays of the sun slanting in from the open lattice—would not have done discredit to the drawing-room at Burton Lacey.

"No prince has come in a carriage and twelve to carry me off to his palace, as you perceive; but I *have* had an offer made me!" Isabel said.

Then she gave a spirited narration of Mr. Blanchard's proposal, mimicking his pompous manner. This proposal excited somewhat ungrateful comments from Richard, and much amused Mr. Wold.

"Now, hush!" Isabel cried; "why cannot you show that you are overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude? Only think of the advantages I have refused for your sakes! the society in which I might have moved—*crept*, I should say!" Then she grew graver, and continued—"But don't say anything against Mr. Blanchard; he meant kindly; though he is rediculously exalted in his own esteem, I ought not to laugh at him. He isn't a bad sort of man, only he is at once weak and worldly."

"An unfortunate combination, Isabel!"

"But he cannot help himself, papa."

Richard, perhaps hoping to hear Clara spoken of, asked if there were any other news?

"I have three wonderful things to tell you.—First, that I had a special invitation to Alderton Park some time since. Secondly,—that Mr. Walter Watkins Darrall, at the station to-day, looked me in the face, his eye-glass in his little eye, and apparently did not discover that I was anyone he had ever seen. Thirdly, and lastly,—that I travelled just now with that rare being, a gentleman.—But how do you reconcile my first two pieces of intelligence?"

"That is easily done. Wilton Watkins is, as ever, a sneak, a mean-spirited little wretch. The boy was certainly father to the man."

"Gently, Richard!" Mr. Wold said, warningly.

"I have no doubt he will win his election—sneak into Parliament, but by means that won't bear daylight. He is very clever in his little way, and his smallness enables him to creep in where none but crawling things can enter."

"Again, gently, Richard. You did not go to Alderton Park, Isabel?"

"Indeed I did not! though it would have been amusing to have seen how far Julia Darrall *could* have been schooled to civility."

"An amusement neither improving, nor in any way desirable for my daughter, whom I would wish always to follow after that charity which 'beareth all things.'"

"Now, you don't ask about *the gentleman.*—Do you see a gentleman every day?" Isabel asked, after a pause.

"Certainly not. By what signs did you know him?"

"By his readiness to give up his seat at the window to a forbidding-looking middle-aged woman; by his carefulness to steer clear of an old woman's cherished packages; by his politeness in handing all his lady fellow-passengers from the carriage; by his gentle voice, his subdued smile, and, in fact, by his general behaviour."

"'Gentle voice and subdued smile.' Well done, Isabel! This is the prince in disguise! The hero of your romance!"

"Do not talk nonsense, Richard, or I will not tell you any more pretty incidents of my travel. Indeed, I don't think I've more to tell."

"We haven't heard half enough of the gentleman—what was he like?"

"I think he was very tall, but he stooped a little; his hair and whiskers were darkish and bushy, and his eyes 'indifferent grey.'"

"Why, it must have been—how was he dressed?"

"I cannot say; carelessly rather than carefully, I should fancy." After a pause, "And, I think, in mourning—but really I don't know; you laughed when I spoke of his subdued smile, so I won't enter into any particulars. Who do you fancy he was, Richard?"

"Is your curiosity excited, Ma'am? I think it may very possibly have been one of our candidates—Reginald Long!"

There was a silence; Richard stirred his tea thoughtfully

long after Mr. Wold and Isabel were busily talking again. Presently, quite *mal-a-propos* to anything that had been said, he remarked, " If it were, you will see him again before long."

"Shall I ? " Isabel asked; not "who ?" as she might have done.

"Who ? see who ? who are you talking about ?" Mr. Wold enquired.

"Reginald Long."

CHAPTER IX.

A WALK WITH MISS ERLRIDGE.

ISABEL was down-stairs betimes next morning, according to the plan of studious life she had proposed to herself. She discerned unconquered realms of knowledge stretching before her, and felt in herself the energy and power to conquer them. Questions as to the worth and good of gained laurels did not yet present themselves. These are after-thoughts.

She was still to take lessons from two or three of her masters—either at home, or by attending classes at Miss Erlridge's. She had been working at her German nearly two hours, when, at half-past eight, Mr. Wold returned from a walk, and they sat down to breakfast.

"Leigh is come home quite polished," Richard said—"I mean comparatively polished. He will be here this evening, and you can judge of his improved manners."

"I should not have thought that six weeks would have done much for him," Isabel answered, opening a letter from Clara Blanchard as she spoke.

"Writing so soon?" Mr. Wold said, smiling.

"Yes, poor child!" was answered with a sigh. Clara's letter was so affectionate and melancholy, that Isabel felt obliged to write a few lines in answer.

"How shall you amuse yourself this morning, Isabel?" her father asked, as he was about to leave her.

"Oh, papa, I have so much to do, I don't know what to begin with. I sha'n't want amusement. I am going to Miss Erlridge's this morning, to see her, and to settle about my lessons."

When she had written a note, half stern and half fond, to Clara, Isabel set out for the familiar, quiet old square.

School duties had not long re-commenced, and Miss Erlridge was peculiarly busy; Isabel had to wait before she could see her. She took down a musty old book; a philosophical work, which she intended to borrow, and began

mastering its introductory chapter; so she waited patiently, as she was not losing what now seemed to her so precious—time.

At twelve o'clock Miss Erlridge appeared.

"My dear, I am delighted to see you. I was sure you would excuse me, knowing that it was school-time. And how are you? and how long have you been home?"

"Since last evening only; so I have lost no time in coming to visit you."

"Good child! And what about Clara? Burton Lacey? the Blanchards? and things in general?"

"Clara is well; she has a beautiful home, and a very nice, sensible mother, and ——"

"My dear, could you walk with me? then we could have a long talk, you know."

"Oh, yes; I shall be very happy."

"I don't mean alone with me; Miss Wilson is unwell, and I have to take out the young ladies. Don't come if you don't like; but I should be sorry to miss a talk with you. We will go quite into the country."

"I will certainly go with you?" Isabel answered.

"I must put on my bonnet at once, then. The young ladies are ready in the school-room; would you like to wait there for me?"

"No; I have no particular friends among them. I'll stay here."

Miss Erlridge was soon equipped after her half-quakerish fashion. She and Isabel waited in the hall while the young ladies filed past them, two and two. The first couple were passing without noticing Isabel; but Miss Erlridge's—"Do you not see Miss Wold, my dears?" made them stop. They then offered to shake hands. Isabel bowed, but did not see the hands—so each succeeding couple passed with a bow, and received a stately recognition.

It was a half-holiday, and Miss Erlridge took her flock to a farm-house a mile or two out of Caiston; she regaled them with milk and curds and whey, and gave them leave to ramble about for an hour, and search for wild flowers in a little wood close by. She and Isabel found a seat on a felled tree. It was a lovely September day, the sun bright and the shadows peculiarly rich-toned, as they are early in that month. From their seat, just outside the wood, which was on rather high ground, Isabel and Miss Erlridge obtained an extensive view over the rich pasture lands and wooded

slopes, and caught many peeps of the gleaming river; the landscape was bounded by low, blue hills in the far distance.

"This is thoroughly pleasant," Isabel said, lifting up her face towards the sunshine, after listening awhile in silence to the rustling of the lightly crisped leaves. "Thank you for bringing me here; but I am afraid you are tired." She took one of the thin long hands lying listlessly on Miss Erlridge's drab dress, and kissed it.

"And this is the proud child who frightens timid and respectable people sometimes," Miss Erlridge said tenderly; "who inspired poor Mr. Blanchard with some awe and dread."

Isabel coloured and laughed. "You are a Lady Una, Miss Erlridge, and can tame lions," she said. "What a pity this hand can't always guide me."

"Isabel, you know that you might seek the guidance of a hand that would always lead you aright. I have long felt that mine is far too feeble," Miss Erlridge added softly.

Isabel replied nothing to these timidly uttered words.

"How pleasant those young voices sound," Miss Erlridge remarked after a pause, as snatches of song and cries of pleasure from her holiday-tempered pupils reached her.

"Very pleasant—at a distance. What a pity it is that we are aware these young girls do not live in an Arcadia of gentleness and innocence—that jealousy and meanness, and conceit of birth, rank, and wealth, are not things unknown among them."

"But we know, also, many beautiful things concerning them—many acts of unselfish kindness done by them, Isabel; their foolish pride offended you sometimes; but you are far prouder than they, my love."

"I know it.

> "'Their pride is yet no match for mine,
> Too proud to care from whence I came.'"

"If you had been born 'noble,' you would have been a very haughty young aristocrat, perhaps, Isabel. Indeed I think you would."

"No, Miss Erlridge; because it would always be my innermost self, not my position or anything external, that I should respect. I should be too proud to value myself for accidental worldly advantages."

"I fancy that you have perverted truth, my child. We

should respect not ourselves, but the Lord in us—the Life. We should respect his image in ourselves."

"If life is spirit, spirit soul, soul self—it is still ourselves we must reverence."

"Dear, I cannot explain what I mean. You will not understand till you have received a meek and teachable spirit. Isabel, you won't be happy till you learn to forget self. It seems to me that you are possessed by a spirit which will bitterly torment you if it remains in possession."

"Don't look so grieved, Miss Erlridge. You shall never be ashamed of me. I won't do anything wrong. I may suffer, but I will not sin," Isabel answered confidently.

"I hope you may not be tempted till you have learnt how to resist temptation."

"I want to be tempted that I may feel my strength—that I may know myself and my own power."

"Hush, my child; that sounds blasphemous to me. Come, it is almost time we gathered the girls together."

"And what about my lessons?" Isabel asked as they went homewards.

"I simply made inquiries as to whether Dr. Vögel and Signor Liga would give you lessons at home."

"Was there any doubt of that?"

"Not much, because you are a favourite with both—they tell me that lessons given to you will be more pleasure than toil. Dr. Vögel is not really complimentary, but he says you are almost the only lady-pupil he has who can appreciate the literature of his country."

"But why did you doubt if they could teach me? Are they so busy?"

"They are busy; but, you know, they profess to instruct the 'children of the nobility and gentry only;' so I thought they might require you to come to the Square to take your lessons."

"Oh! And they really *can* consent to come to a room over a shop. Very gracious! I hardly know if I will trouble them so far, however."

"Oh, yes you will, Isabel; do not be foolish and punish yourself. You ought to feel gratified that your talents and industry overcome the prejudice attaching to your position."

"Ought I? Well, perhaps, according to my own theory, I ought. At all events, I must have lessons, and from these teachers," she added.

"Miss Ravey is leading us home by Castle Street, I see,

Isabel—shall we leave you at your door? I did not mean to return this way."

"You will settle about the hour for my lessons, and be so kind as to let me know? Oh! but I want you to lend me a book, so I may as well go all the way and fetch it."

"Who was that, my dear?" Miss Erlridge asked. She noticed that a gentleman who passed glanced at Isabel, as if half inclined to recognise her, and that Isabel coloured slightly, looking resolutely another way when he came near.

"I do not know—he was in the same carriage when I came from Burton Lacey; I suppose he remembered me."

"I daresay he did."

Isabel procured her book and returned home alone. As she went down Castle Street, she again met her travelling companion, this time walking with a gentleman whom her father slightly knew. They both glanced hastily round, and noted where she disappeared.

She coloured again—why she did not know; but not with pleasure certainly.

Isabel called this a very idle day. It was dinner time when she was dressed, and dusk soon after dinner.

She played to herself in the dark—dreamy, mysterious music—till, the shop being shut, Mr. Wold and Richard came up-stairs to tea.

Leigh Engledew appeared in the evening—he was certainly more neat than formerly, and his hands were clean; perhaps Richard had given him a hint.

He had not heard Isabel play, and Richard asked his sister to do so.

Leigh had been turning over the music in Isabel's folio; he drew out one of Beethoven's sonatas, put it on the music-stand, and asked Miss Wold to play in a manner that, she fancied, defied her to do it justice.

She did not do it justice—that boy made her nervous by watching her fingers so intently, as if lying in wait for faults and deficiencies. She tried to recover herself, but did not play even as well as usual, and there was often more fire than finish, more passion than correctnesss, in her playing. She was angry with herself, and when she concluded, her cheek was flushed with vexation.

"There! I played very ill, I know. Don't feel obliged to say anything polite, Mr. Engledew," she said, rising from the piano.

"I didn't mean to say anything polite," was answered

quietly. "It was full of faults, and some passages were got over in a most slovenly manner."

Richard laughed—"You are not complimentary, Leigh!"

"Yes! I am," said Leigh, bluntly. "If I didn't think she had it in her to play better, I shouldn't take the pains to find fault. But there was the true Beethoven feeling in her rendering of the slow movement, which is easy of execution."

"I will give up music, or play well, something more than schoolgirlishly well," Isabel remarked to herself more than to anyone there present.

"I think you may do the latter—I will give you all the help I can, if you will practice and be patient. I am sure you ought to practice—you've little enough to do!"

"About that you know nothing. But I will practise and be patient if you will have me for a pupil."

"It's a bargain then!" Leigh extended his hand shyly, and Isabel, amused, put hers into it. After that evening they were good friends. Leigh was an exacting master, but Isabel a docile pupil, because her heart was in her studies.

Leigh did his best to impart all his knowledge to Isabel: to teach her the philosophy of music, and to make her learned in the intricacies of composition: he wished her to receive music, as he had done, in its twofold nature—as art and science closely linked; almost blended into one.

CHAPTER X.

MR. LONG.

"MR. LONG called in while you were out this morning, father," Richard said, a day or two after Isabel had met her fellow-traveller.

"Did he seem in good spirits about his election?"

"Not particularly. He is coming in again to see you. A nice fellow he is: such a thorough gentleman!"

"I wonder if it is the same person," Isabel said.

"Same person as—oh! I remember!"

Isabel was soon to have this question resolved. That evening, as she was, according to her custom, playing in the dark hour, she heard some one enter the adjoining room. The lamp there was lighted, and she went in, expecting to find her father, as it was just his time. Instead, she saw her travelling companion. The servant, who was about to leave the room, exclaimed, "Your papa told me to show Mr. Long up-stairs, Miss Isabel. The shop's just shuting up."

"Miss Wold, I believe?" Reginald Long said, with his gentle smile, in answer to Isabel's stately bow. "We are not quite strangers, I think; are you not the studious young lady who came to Caiston a few days since—in the same train by which I arrived?"

Mr. Long was not a very young man. Setting Isabel down as an intelligent school-girl, he addressed her easily—she thought condescendingly: the affability which was meant to set a shy girl at ease, Isabel received as the patronage of a superior to one of lower station.

"I did return to Caiston from a visit in the country, a few days since," she answered stiffly. She did not allow, by her manner, that she recognised Mr. Long. He smiled at her prudery.

Her father and brother appeared almost immediately.

Richard glanced inquiringly at Isabel: but she would not understand what his look meant. She was astonished when,

after a long talk between the gentlemen—during which she read—her father said—"Let us have tea, Isabel; Mr. Long will take it with us."

"Very gladly," Mr. Long answered cordially.

"Will you ring, Richard?" Isabel said, without rising. She did not intend to leave the room as if to make extra preparations for a distinguished guest. There was no need: but it would have been the same had there been ever so great need.

When Mr. Long took his cup from Isabel's hand, he seemed determined to put away business with the note and memorandum-book that he consigned to his pocket.

"Are you at Miss Erlridge's school?" he asked Isabel. "I saw you walking with her this morning. What a sweet woman she looks! She is a general favourite, I have understood."

"I left school at Midsummer. I was walking with Miss Erlridge for the sake of her company: I like her very much;"—was answered with measured dignity.

"I hope I did not offend you by supposing you to be still a school-girl. It was merely the fact of seeing you with Miss Erlridge."

"Isabel is not sensitive on that point, I imagine," her father said. "She remained at school, by her own wish, two years after we first wanted her home; and now she is going to plunge deeper than ever into various studies."

"Indeed! It is unusual for young ladies to prefer school to home. Were you so happy?"

"I don't know that I was particularly happy. I did not go to school to be happy," Isabel replied, busying herself in filling her father's cup, and turning from the questioner rather pettishly.

"There was a little acquaintance of mine—Clara Blanchard—at Miss Erlridge's. Did you like her?"

"She was my friend!" Isabel kindled a little. "I was returning from Burton Lacey when we travelled in the same carriage," she added.

"Indeed! then I might earlier have made your acquaintance, had it not happened that I was prevented from dining at Burton Lacey when last invited there. Was it a brilliant party?"

"I am no judge; I thought it very tiresome."

"In that case I did not lose much."

"Isabel is, of course, quite unused to that sort of thing—so is not competent to judge," her father remarked.

"And all young ladies find dinner-parties dull, I think. You did recognise me as your travelling companion, then?" Mr. Long asked, rather mischievously.

"You picked up my book, I believe?" Isabel coloured a little.

"I did, and wanted to speak to you about your German studies, but you looked forbidding. I am sorry to say that you had proof given you that it is necessary for young ladies travelling alone to look severe."

"What was that?" Mr. Wold asked quickly.

"There was a young puppy in the carriage who had certainly not been trained to conduct himself like a gentleman," Mr. Long returned.

"You did not complain, Isabel."

"He only stared at me unpleasantly, papa."

"Nothing but consideration for you prevented my giving him a lesson." Mr. Long spoke mildly, but with a flash from his gentle eyes that told of something other than mildness and gentleness.

"I think I could have protected myself had there been occasion. But I was obliged to you for the way in which you did, or rather your paper did, come between us." Isabel looked into Mr. Long's face for the first time.

"Are you a German scholar, Richard, as well as your sister?" asked Mr. Long. "And do you two read Göethe and Schiller together?"

"Yes, sometimes. But Isabel is a devourer, and gets on too rapidly."

"I have no sister or mother," Mr. Long said, lapsing into silence for some time, watching Isabel, and, as it were, taking in the poetry of her relation to that father and brother without paying any conscious attention to what was going on.

"What a beautiful old room this is!" he said, rousing himself presently and rising to look round. "How elaborately the wainscoting is carved."

"I believe this was a great lord's country mansion in times gone by," Mr. Wold remarked.

"And where is your piano, Miss Wold? I heard enough of it as I came up the stairs to wish to hear it again."

"The piano is in the next room," Isabel replied carelessly. Because this visitor was of a rank superior to her own, she

strove against her admiration of his gentle courteousness, and failed to show herself in an advantageous light.

"Will you play for me? I am fond of music, and seldom get any. I am a solitary man when at home, and therefore am a great wanderer."

"Isabel will be glad to oblige you," her father said, and Richard rose to open the piano and light the candles upon it. Mr. Long followed him into the little room.

"Enchanted ground this! Your sister's study, I suppose. Well, she has a formidable deal of dry reading to do, if she means to get through the works in this bookcase," he exclaimed, as he perused their lettered backs.

"Oh, those are old books of my father's; but I believe Isabel has read most of them, though she won't confess it. She has been a regular book-worm."

"This is a work I have in vain tried to meet with. Where did you get it?" Mr. Long asked, taking down an old volume.

"I bought it at a bookstall kept by a man who is one of the notorieties of Caiston. Would you like to read it?"

"Very much. But now for music, if your sister will favour me."

Isabel made Richard play some duets with her. Then she played by herself. Mr. Long sitting near, asked for one thing after another.

Lastly, she sang a lovely, melancholy song of Molique's. Mr. Long listened with his brow upon his hand. He looked up when she had finished, and said—

"I had a sister who used to sing that, Miss Wold. I have not heard it for five years. I should think that she was about your age when we lost her. How old are you?" he asked simply and most unceremoniously.

"Just nineteen."

"Indeed! my sister was only sixteen, but a very sweet, womanly girl." With a sigh Mr. Long rose, and discovered how late it was.

"Thank you for a pleasant evening in a home," he said to Mr. Wold. "It has been a real enjoyment. I will take this book, and bring it back when I have finished it."

"Well! and what do you think of *the* gentleman, on nearer acquaintance, Isabel?" Mr. Wold enquired after the departure of his guest.

"I don't know."

"Try and find out! How do you like him?"

" He certainly is a gentleman ; but I do not like him so well as I should have imagined that I should."

" Why not, child? Come, give a reason!"

" He didn't please me, and he did please me. I can't give any reason except that he didn't and did. So there's a true woman's answer. Fortunately, it is of no consequence whether Mr. Long's manners are to my taste, or not."

" I think I could find out in what he did *not* please you!" her father remarked with a somewhat mischievous smile. " He treated my little girl more as a little girl, a school-girl, than she liked to be treated; he was not sufficiently distant and ceremonious."

Isabel did not say yea or nay to this accusation. She lighted her candle to go up-stairs. She came to her father to bid him good-night, not looking particularly amiable.

Mr. Wold put his hand on his daughter's shoulder, and said very gravely, " You are too proud and sensitive for your own happiness, child. You are inclined to see disrespect where none is meant, and to meet slights and annoyances half way."

Isabel answered nothing.

During the few following weeks Mr. Long spent a good many evenings in that room in Castle Street. His manner towards Isabel changed—it became sufficiently deferential to satisfy her—it was inexpressibly gentle towards all women. Isabel kept on the defensive, and did not unbend from her distant dignity more than she could possibly help; her pride made her suspicious. This graciousness of Mr. Long's was all very well; but would he remember any of them when the election was once over?

She often told herself that he would not.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ASSAULT.

ONE fine blowing October afternoon Isabel started on one of the long walks with which she occasionally indulged herself. Richard had promised to meet her and accompany her home—she meant to go far into the country.

As she went down Castle Street, it happened that Mr. Long was coming up it, walking between two gentlemen.

Isabel treated him to-day as she generally did treat him when they met out of doors; she looked steadily another way to avoid inflicting upon him the humiliating necessity of recognising the hosier's daughter when he was in the society of those of his own rank. She was conscious that he looked at her, that he raised his hand to his hat, ready to bow if she should give him the opportunity—but she did not. They passed quite close, and Isabel gazed straight before her.

"That was the cut direct, Long," one of Mr. Long's companions said; "a beautiful girl, too. She saw you, for she coloured. Why wouldn't she notice you? Perhaps you were not in sufficiently good company, ha! ha!"

"Perhaps not," Mr. Long answered, quietly.

"A haughty beauty! Who is she, pray?"

"Miss Wold."

"The hosier's daughter? You don't mean so! Oh, I see! A politic and political flirtation! That's right! that's the way!"

The speaker laughed loudly. The sound of that laugh reached Isabel. It was long before the fresh wind cooled the heat of her glowing cheeks. Yet it was not Mr. Long who laughed,—of that she was quite sure.

Isabel walked hurriedly for a long time. Then when she was quite in the country, she not only moderated her pace, but lingered much by the way, resting on stiles in the meadows, or on felled trees lying in the lanes; hers was an unusually meditative walk.

From a little wooded eminence she watched the brief glory of the sunset, and looked along the road that Richard was to come—but the fields and lanes were solitary.

It was one of those evenings on which, as one wends one's way through narrow leafy lanes, the spirit of autumn is felt to be palpably present. It makes itself heard in every sough of the gusty west wind, seeming—as it ruffles dying foliage, whitening the hedges, by showing the pale sides of the bramble, alder, and ash leaves, or as it wails weirdly among taller trees—to creep eeryly through Nature's tresses, as superstitious fear stirs sometimes among the roots of human hair. Isabel felt something of this; it grew dusk and Richard did not appear. She pursued her homeward way hastily, for she had far to go. During her walk she had been thinking, among other things, of Miss Erlridge's sorrowful predictions, of her gently-expressed fears that her pupil must needs suffer much before she would be of a chastened and meek spirit. A kind of foreboding of approaching evil, vague, and awe-inspiring from its vagueness, came over her; it chilled her, she shivered and wrapped her cloak more closely round her.

A hare which ran across the darkening path made her start and then tremble: she laughed and tried to think only of pleasant things as she sped homeward very quickly.

Turning a corner of the lane, she saw two figures approaching—neither of them was Richard, and Isabel felt afraid—they were men who laughed and sang coarsely. She might have taken another road; but it would have led her a long way round. She thought her terror cowardly, and resolved to conquer such senseless nervousness. So, looking as proud and fearless as possible, and moderating her step because she would not appear to be in haste, she went on.

"Who goes there so late? Going to meet your lover, my dear?" one man asked. "Hush! come along, Jem, 'tis a lady!" he said, after a stupid look of admiration at Isabel's impassive face.

"Lady or lass, I don't care," the other, a little less sober, exclaimed, throwing himself in Isabel's path. She swerved aside and tried to pass, but the fellow held out his arms, declaring she should kiss him first.

"Man, touch me at your peril!" Isabel cried, her eyes flashing and her heart beating wildly. He paused, but his companion burst into a taunting laugh; stung by this, he caught her arm as she again tried to pass.

Isabel freed herself by a desperate struggle, and a wrench that dislocated her slight wrist. Then she ran away madly, hearing or fancying steps gaining upon her, and feeling as if polluting breath were hot upon her cheek.

She was not pursued—they looked after her, laughing, conscious that their gait was not steady enough to allow them to overtake her. But she ran on ever more wildly, never pausing to look behind her. Presently she encountered some one; was it Richard? The lane was very dark now.

"Miss Wold!" The voice—Reginald Long's—was full of wonder and concern.

Isabel seized his arm and then first turned round—no one was in sight. She let go immediately, staggered to the roadside, and sat down. Even, in her breathless exhaustion, she felt bitterly annoyed that Mr. Long, of all people, should meet her running madly along a lane at dusk.

"You have been alarmed, Miss Wold. Compose yourself. You are safe now," he said, and stood beside her, looking down on her compassionately.

She was almost suffocated by the beating of her heart, and could not speak, though she tried to do so.

"Sit still and do not hurry yourself," he added, soothingly. "I will see you home, and you can tell me all about it."

Isabel rose presently and went to a little stream that ran by the other side of the lane. Mr. Long could see that she was bathing her wrist.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes; but I was washing off the touch of those dreadful fingers," she gasped. "The hurt is nothing to *that*."

"Let me feel your wrist, is it much injured? I am something of a doctor." He took it and touched it timidly and tenderly. "The wrist is dislocated," he said, quietly, and bound her handkerchief round it. "Now keep it quite still; take my arm with your other hand, and come home if you feel able to walk."

She obeyed, and when she seemed able to talk, he asked her what had happened. She told him in a few indignant words, then added, "I was foolish to be so frightened."

"Is your wrist very painful?" he asked, when he could see her white face by the light of the lamps they passed.

"Tolerably painful," she answered, smiling.

"It is wrong of your father and brother to let you wander about alone."

"Oh no, it is not—I choose to go. It is nobody's fault. I

am my own mistress. Richard promised to come and meet me; but I suppose that he was not able to do so. He said that he would leave Castle Street before the shop was shut."

Isabel took some pains to say those last words slowly and distinctly—very repugnant words as they were. It seemed to her fitting that she should say them then, as she leaned on Mr. Long's arm, and he bent down towards her with a bewildering mixture of protection, compassion, and respect in his manner. She looked up at him sharply as she spoke, and thought that he winced as from something distasteful.

But even Isabel could not detect any change in his tone when he spoke next.

"Country rambles are too pleasant for me to wish to debar anyone from taking them. But you should be prudent. It is better to shun than to defy danger and annoyance!"

"Do you think so? I think that it is better to defy and to overcome difficulty and danger of any kind!"

"Not for a woman. Women are weak. Prudence is the valour of the weak, you know."

"We may be physically weak, but we ought to be so morally strong that that should not matter. I was foolish and childish enough to feel afraid. Those men saw it, or I should have been safe."

"Do not place yourself in a similar predicament again, for the sake of trying your courage, pray!" Mr. Long said smiling, indulgent of Isabel's proud waywardness. "You suffer too much in the trial," he added, "and others will suffer. It may be some weeks before you will be able to play."

Isabel looked dismayed. She had not before thought of this consequence of her adventure.

"Would you not like to have a large dog as a companion?" Mr. Long asked presently.

"Yes! I mean to beg papa to get me a Newfoundland." Isabel spoke faintly, and her feet moved wearily.

"Make my arm of more use. I know that the pain of that wrist must be great. We are nearly home now."

Home they arrived at last.

"I have been very uneasy about you, children," Mr. Wold said, meeting them in the dim hall.

"It is Mr. Long, papa. I have not seen Richard!"

"My child! What has happened? What is the matter?" the father exclaimed, alarmed at Isabel's face, and at seeing her return without Richard.

But Isabel, who had mounted the stairs with difficulty, instead of answering, sank into an easy chair, and closed her eyes.

A few words from Mr. Long explained all.

Richard had misunderstood his sister's directions; he had started by the same road that Isabel had done; so had followed her; he returned soon after her. Then Mr. Long took his departure, promising, on his way to his hotel, to call on Mr. Wold's medical man, and request his immediate attendance in Castle Street.

Isabel's wrist was set. She had a great deal of pain, and passed a feverish night—full of strange, wild, but not altogether unpleasant dreams.

She was quite ill for the next few days, and wonderfully patient of being so.

CHAPTER XII.

LONG OR DARRALL.

LEIGH ENGLEDEW was wroth when he heard of Isabel's accident; he had often told her that girls should not go about alone—now here was most provoking proof of the truth of his remark.

"To lame herself, just as she was getting on so well! I had hopes that she would soon ——" What, he did not say; for now, as often, he grew confused when Isabel entered. She had kept her room for two or three days, and looked pale and languid as she came in, dressed in a plain violet merino, which swept round her in soft and graceful folds. Her right arm was in a sling.

Her entrance occasioned a stir among the three gentlemen. She was compelled by her father to take the arm-chair by the fire, and to sit still and be waited upon. When she was settled, they went on with animated talk about the election, Reginald Long, and his prospects.

"By-the-bye, he has been most kind in constantly inquiring for you, Isabel, though he has been so busy; but really he takes the thing—the election—pretty coolly: he is not half excited and earnest enough about it," Mr. Wold said, energetically.

"No. I really think papa is far more anxious," Richard observed. "Mr. Long's feeling is that he should like to get into Parliament, for the sake of the work and the opportunity of usefulness; but there is so much, in the means and manner of getting in, wholly repugnant to his taste, of which he cannot approve, that he despairs of success."

"That is not all," Mr. Wold said thoughtfully. "He has had some great grief that he cannot quite rally against; he struggles with an inclination to be generally indifferent."

"His mother's death was a heavy trial."

"Yes—but that was long since, as I understand. Merely her loss would not have taken so strong a hold upon him.

There is some mystery connected with his father—a mystery of ill-doing, I fear; but it is not well to speculate about these things—he is a good and an honourable man, that is enough for me; yet I wish he were more in earnest, as he has entered the lists."

"I have heard that his father was a bad and violent man," Leigh said. "My mother lived in the same village when she was a girl, and remembered that strange stories were told of him; he used to be called Devil Long. People say that he is still living abroad."

"Yes, yes; *I* have heard those rumours, but I do not believe them. Richard, give me another cup of tea—then I must go into the town. Isabel, there are some books in your room which Mr. Long brought when he returned the one he borrowed; he told me he thought you would like them. Will you have them to amuse you this morning?—you must keep yourself quiet."

"If you please," Isabel answered, languidly and absently.

"I'll make her quite comfortable," Richard said. He brought a little table, piled her books upon it, and asked—

"Now, what will you have? Which of the books? Tell me; then I can open it out on this reading desk. You can't hold anything heavy with only one hand."

"I don't think I want to read this morning. If I do anything, I shall just look over what I'm to go through with Dr. Vögel. Give me my work, please, and you and Leigh play. But I forgot: I can't work. Never mind; I'll be idle."

Leigh stood looking on; then he rendered two acceptable attentions (very gallantly for him), by putting a stool at her feet, and a little vase of flowers close beside her.

"How drooping and dejected those chrysanthemums look! Move them a little that way, Leigh. Thanks; the pale sunshine brightens them a little. Now go and play your best, Sir. I shall do nothing but listen."

She composed herself to listen, leaning her head back, and drooping the fringed lids over her eyes, her one able hand lying listlessly on her lap.

She still remained in almost the same position when the music had long ceased, and the players were gone to their different drudgery.

Whatever her meditations were like, she was startled out of them after a time by a little scream she knew to be from the housemaid, Mary: by a kind of scuffle, first on the stairs,

then on the landing, and by a voice like that of some one speaking to, scolding, and encouraging a refractory child.

"Mr. Long!" Mary announced. "He wants you, Miss." Mary looked frightened and excited.

"Come now, Wolf! good dog! Show your best manners before a lady!" Mr. Long entered, leading a fine black Newfoundland dog. Isabel rose, her face crimsoned with pleasure.

"Come, come! you must advance and lie down at your new mistress's feet," Mr. Long said, dragging the dog up to where Isabel stood. Wolf was then formally introduced, and offered Isabel's acceptance: Isabel's acceptance was very ready and cordial. After much coaxing the dog was prevailed upon to lie still upon the hearthrug; Isabel stooping to caress him with her left hand, looking up at the giver with a very winsome expression of gratitude in her eyes—those eyes that varied with her moods, looking sometimes like violets in sunshine, sometimes like those of the fallen arch-angel, full of "black fire."

"That would never have been hurt if Wolf had been with you," Mr. Long said, pointing to Isabel's disabled wrist. "You will find him docile, Miss Wold, and very faithful and affectionate. I know all about his birth, parentage, and education, and can conscientiously recommend him to a lady's service."

When the dog had been fully discussed, and lay blinking at the fire composedly, not requiring further attention, Mr. Long appeared rather at a loss for something to say. His manner became less easy than usual, more formal and distant. Isabel was not displeased to notice this. A proud woman likes to inspire a respect which, when she is alone, hedges her round most closely and formidably: being a far more invincible, though less palpable, barrier than the protection of society and conventionalisms. That Mr. Long's usually easy address was now somewhat embarrassed and timid, Isabel accepted as a proof of her power to inspire this respect: pleased by this, she was very gracious and accessible. She thanked Mr. Long for the books he had lent her, saying that she should read them with pleasure, and she intelligently discussed the merits of the one he had just returned. When the conversation again flagged, and still Mr. Long did not go, she rang the bell, and desired that Richard should be summoned to a consultation about Wolf's accommodation.

Altogether Isabel to-day appeared to Mr. Long as more gracious and womanly, less crude and girlish, than she had ever done before: this was the beginning of a third phase of his feeling towards her.

Mr. Long presently walked down Castle Street in meditative mood. He was not pleased to be clapped on the shoulder sudddenly, and accosted by a loud voice—"Well, Long, how goes the day?"

He raised his eyes from the pavement to the speaker's face—there was mild and dignified reproof in their expression.

"Beg pardon; but you were in so deep—Getting on well, eh?"

"Indifferently well."

"You are too squeamish. It'll be no go if you don't look sharp. Wilton Watkins ha'n't any scruples to stand in *his* way. By-the-bye, I saw you just now with a very splendid dog. I want such a brute. Is he to be disposed of?"

"He is not."

"You don't mean to say you've given him away?"

"I have so done."

"Then it's to the hosier's daughter, by Jove! That's all I wanted to know. I say, my good fellow, take care. You may go too far. Of course you don't mean anything; so stop in time."

"Our roads part here. Good morning." With the politest of dignified bows Reginald Long went his own way to meet Mr. Wold and others at the Liberal Association Committee Rooms.

How full of dreams that short November day was for Isabel! It was the languor left by the few days' fever and pain, she thought, that made her so idly content, so luxuriously listless. This should be the last day of indulgence, she resolved. She had her new friend Wolf in the room in the evening, fed him with biscuits, and patted his head again and again. She forgave him, though a whisk of his bushy tail knocked the vase of flowers from the table where Leigh had put it; though the precious little vase was broken, and most of the poor flowers shattered. Wolf was certainly awkwardly large for a parlour dog, but he was allowed to remain. Mr. Wold and Richard were both out that evening. Isabel sat in that easy chair by the fire, from which she had scarcely moved all day, a volume of Göethe open on her knee, her eyes sometimes on the page, but as often gazing into the

fire, or at the great dog Wolf, who dozed on the hearthrug at her feet.

It was hard to say whether Wolf or his mistress started most when Mr. Wold and Richard came home.

"Up so late, Isabel! You foolish child! Do you know it is past twelve?"

"No, indeed, I did not. How hot you look, papa!"

"No wonder. Enough to make a man look and feel outwardly and inwardly 'hot!'"

"That young Darrall is even a greater scoundrel than I thought him," Richard said.

"What is the matter?"

"Why, it seems perfectly certain that only one Liberal will be returned. Indeed, the Tory faction is so strong and so busy—there's disgraceful intimidation carried on—that even that's not quite certain. There's the tug of war between this precious Darrall and Reginald Long, and ——"

"And this most honourable and promising young scamp is doing what he can, fairly and unfairly, to curry favour with all parties; he's ready to sell himself over and over again. Amongst other pitiful proceedings, he has been raking up old stories about Long's father, cunningly mixing up Long in them, and so exciting a prejudice against him in the minds of some of our party, upon whom we confidently relied."

Richard was as warm upon the subject as his father now; not so much for principle's sake, perhaps, as for the sake of the representative of those principles.

"And so you have both been battling bravely for Mr. Long?" Isabel exclaimed. "I hope Mr. Wilton Watkins won't get in. If I were a man, how I would like to fight against wrong!—to crush such a mean, wicked creature!" Isabel raised her eyes to her father's face with fire flashing from them.

"Hey, Isabel! I thought you had hardly given a thought to the matter—hardly cared if it were Long or Darrall!"

She sheathed the fire with her white lids—said, after a pause, "You will be able to refute Mr. Darrall's scandals—to beat him, won't you?"

"If we chose to defile our hands by handling his own weapons—yes. But Reginald Long is the last man to stoop to low retaliation of personalities. Now to bed, Isabel."

"Won't you have supper, papa?"

"Nothing but some cold water. We must breakfast early

to-morrow, Isabel. I must be out betimes ; but you needn't rise, my dear. Has your wrist been painful? You look pale."

"Oh, no! Now Wolf, good fellow, get up." Isabel stooped to pat him, and wished him more than one "good-night."

"I will have the honour of seeing Mr. Wolf to his apartment," Richard said. "It will be 'love me, love my dog,' with Lady Isabel, I perceive."

"He is such a noble creature!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"I WONDER YOU DO NOT MARRY."

REGINALD LONG lost his election. Perforce of "bribery and corruption," Wilton Watkins Darrall was triumphantly returned.

The whole city, of course, was in wild excitement; and Isabel, who had spent much of the morning in the deep window-seat looking out, knew how the day had gone long before her father and brother came home, exasperated and dejected.

She was full of sympathy with their disappointment, and of kindred indignation; so that it was some satisfaction to pour out the tale of wrong and failure to her.

"What provokes me most is, that it would not have turned out as it has done but for the contemptible timidity of a few of my fellow-townsmen. Think of Smith, Owen, Jones, and Gatterick, all well-to-do men, refusing to vote from fear of 'losing custom,' 'injuring their connection!' I have no patience with such cowardice—such time-serving—such want of manliness!" Mr. Wold paced the room in hot ire.

"Of course, when such men as these, well enough off to afford to be independent, act in this cowardly way, it can't be much wondered at that those in their employ, and those a grade lower in the social scale, either follow their example or do worse—sell their votes," Richard said.

"It is these men who encourage the insolence of the higher classes," Isabel exclaimed. "They are slaves ready to be trampled upon; and it is a matter of course that there should be those ready to trample upon them. I hope you spoke your mind to them, papa."

"Pretty plainly, I think, daughter; I feel it a disgrace to the town that this young scamp should be one of its representatives, when such a man as Reginald Long offered himself!"

Mr. Wold and Richard had hardly eaten that day; the

table, first ready for dinner, then for tea, had been waiting since six, and it was past nine now.

Isabel was making the tea, and giving vent to another burst of indignation, when the room-door opened, and Reginald Long came in, looking worn and harassed; but quite calm, and as if this defeat amused him, after rather a painful wise.

"I did not know I had so warm a fair partisan," he said, smiling at sight of Isabel's knit brow and flashing eyes, on which the soft lamplight fell full, as she bent over the tea-tray.

"I am not your partisan, Mr. Long; but I am a bitter opponent of meanness and cunning in the person of Mr. Wilton Watkins Darrall, and of slavish timidity in the persons of ——"

"Hush, Isabel!"

"Oh, I wasn't going to mention names. I don't remember their respectable and distinguished names!" Isabel answered. "Now, come," she added, more gently, "I am sure you must all want your tea."

"I am glad to have it from your hand again," Mr. Long said. "Is your wrist quite strong now?—That teapot must be heavy for you to lift."

"Oh, I can manage excellently," Isabel answered, hastily. "My hand is quite well." She did not care to remember her adventure.

"Then I shall hope to hear you play once again."

"I should not think you could feel inclined for music to-night."

"Indeed, I do! It will refresh me—soothe my fierce anger and excitement!" And Mr. Long smiled, but wearily. "It is very pleasant to me, a beaten man, to be received so kindly by you all!"

"I should feel angry with you, Mr. Long, for your indifference, when we are all so savagely vexed; but I think you feel your disappointment more than you choose to confess," Richard said.

"I do not feel it deeply. It has been attended by most painful circumstances; old wounds have been cruelly re-opened;" Mr. Long spoke very sadly; "yet," he added, brightening, "there is a great deal of good to be got out of a beating. A defeated man learns the difference between true and false friends. There's a way of getting more out of a failure than out of a success. But I am no stoic philosopher. What-

ever else I forget, I shall not forget the steady, manly, consistent support I have had from Mr. Wold—the many personal kindnesses from you all. I shall be ready to serve you at any time and to any extent in my power, and I shall earnestly desire an opportunity for showing my gratitude. I only regret that I don't say this as a successful instead of as an unsuccessful man. That is a long speech for me!" Mr. Long concluded, endeavouring to smile off some of his emotion.

"Very fine!" Isabel tried to say to herself, though his tone convinced her of his sincerity. "How long will he remember his obligations, I wonder! How long will he keep up a friendship with a shopkeeper?" She blushed deeply when Mr. Long's eyes met hers, and felt ashamed of her attempted scepticism. Those eyes were so clear-seeing and so truth-telling, they often seemed to read her thoughts.

"How is my friend Wolf?" Mr. Long asked, rallying out of a fit of thoughtfulness, during which they could all see that he looked really ill and dejected.

"Oh, very well; and he behaves admirably. We have had some long rambles. The only fault I have to find with him is, that he makes a sensation wherever I take him. He is almost too handsome; but people will grow used to seeing him, I suppose."

"You are silent about his exploits of devouring a piece of beef with the stuff in which it was being salted—running off with a small ham, a piece of bacon, and a few other trifles," Richard said, smiling.

"Oh, that was the servant's fault; the things were not in their proper place. It was not to be expected of the poor fellow that when, all the doors being open, he walked into the larder, and found such things on the floor, he should leave them untouched!"

"Well! perhaps that was too strong a trial for dog's virtue; though I have my doubts as to whether a dog of his education ought not to have resisted even such powerful temptation. However that may be, I am glad the poor animal has secured so indulgent a mistress. He has been accustomed to being petted by a lady's hand," Mr. Long added softly, and with a sigh; at least Isabel believed that she heard him sigh, and that she detected a softening of look and tone—but young ladies are very fanciful.

"And you think of leaving Caiston to-morrow?" Mr. Wold inquired of Mr. Long.

"Yes! Not because it is the scene of my 'disgraceful and deserved defeat,' as my opponents express it; but because I am imperatively summoned elsewhere. I have work enough cut out for me. If the day had gone differently, I do not see how I should have managed. Amongst other things, I find that my bailiff has been systematically robbing me, and oppressing my few and poor tenants—my own fault for leaving to another matters I ought to have attended to myself: also that I have been defeated in a certain lawsuit—my own fault again, I was not sufficiently in earnest—did not give myself enough trouble about it. You see," with a twilight smile, half light, half gloom, "I am a disappointed, defeated, and deceived man, one whose society is no honour to anyone."

"Have you ever put your whole strength into *any* effort, been thoroughly in earnest about anything, Mr. Long?" Isabel turned towards him and flashed one of her sudden glances full into his eyes, asking this question.

He looked startled at first, then the expression of the eyes that met hers, made Isabel's cheek and her lids droop. Already she had condemned herself as over-bold. He answered—

"Thank you for putting that question—I will remember it, and ask it of myself when I have time to reply to it. I think I shall put my whole strength into one effort some day, Miss Wold." He spoke the last words low, and with a mystical smile; they seemed only meant for Isabel's ear. When they were spoken he glanced at her timidly, as she left the table for the fireside.

"You will have a dull Christmas-time in the country, I am afraid," Mr. Wold observed.

"Yes; it is the first time I have been at home, save for a day or two at a time, since my mother died. But I shall be fully occupied: that is the grand cure for dullness. I shall take the reins of government in my own hand, set my house in order most completely, and play the good landlord on my own estate."

"I suppose you have some society in the neighbourhood of Moor Hall.—I wonder you do not marry, and cease to be so much of a solitary wanderer!" Mr. Wold said, suddenly.

Mr. Long coloured a little, but answered quietly—"I hope to do so some day; a lonely and roving life is not to my taste."

Isabel—thinking of the lady to whom Wolf had belonged,

and of the sigh she had heard—looked up quickly; therefore she had the full benefit of Mr. Long's gaze, which rested on her after he had spoken.

They had all been sitting round the fire since tea; Mr. Long now rose to remind Isabel of his wish to hear her play once more, if it would not hurt her hand: he opened the piano for her.

Just as she was about to begin, Leigh came in. He always blurted out his thoughts—so, after hasty salutations, he went straight up to the piano, and said to Isabel—

"Oh! you can play now! I thought your wrist was too stiff this morning."

"Did I say so, Mr. Engledew?" she asked, haughtily.

"No! perhaps not; but you wouldn't play. I thought nothing else could prevent you."

"I was not inclined to play."

"You wanted to sit by the window and watch the people instead, I suppose. I did not imagine that you took so much interest in politics."

Isabel began to play immediately, to put an end to the dialogue: but she was nervous and out of practice. Leigh told her she played badly, and she was quite of his opinion. Leigh, feeling presently that his want of courtesy was tacitly rebuked by Mr. Long's kindly considerateness, drew back rather sullenly.

Isabel tried to sing, owning that her wrist was slightly painful, but succeeded still worse; she could not steady her voice. What had come to her? she did not know. Mr. Long begged she would not use her hand any more; he was sure it was very painful. She answered, she hardly knew what, and took the seat he placed for her close to the open door of her tiny conservatory; she knew still less what ailed her, when Mr. Long said softly, bending over her chair, while Leigh and Richard were performing a noisy duet—

"Thank you very much for the effort to oblige me. I could thank you still more, if I dared, for the feeling which, I hope, caused your failure."

"A feeling of stiffness in the wrist, and hoarseness in the voice," Isabel said recklessly, though his tone made her thrill with an unknown sensation. What did this mean?

He did not heed her words: they were not very audible.

"I have something more to thank you for, too," he continued. "I shall long remember the question you startled me with to-day. Its spirit flashed into dark places and re-

vealed their darkness. In any effort to make dark places light, I shall think of you! I believe I do not naturally want energy; yet I have allowed myself to be depressed by circumstances, more than was right or manly. But ——" he paused.

"It is cold in this room," Isabel said, rising with a shiver; she went back to her former seat by the fire. Mr. Long followed her, and began to talk to Mr. Wold; but while he stayed, his eyes often rested on Isabel, as she sat in her low chair, working steadily at some dainty bit of 'broderie, never looking up. The fire flashing on her pretty busy hands, bent white brow, and glossy hair; likewise on a golden chain and bracelet, and warm-hued silk dress: she was certainly good to look upon.

Mr. Long, apparently, felt fearful of forgetting in what likeness of flesh dwelt the spirit he had bound himself to remember.

At last, quite late, he rose up to go, even then with evident reluctance. Wind and rain were lashing the window-panes, and the room was so warm, bright, pleasant, no wonder that he felt loth to leave it.

"I am afraid you will have a dismal day for your journey to-morrow," Mr. Wold observed.

"Ah! I shall be setting my teeth against the storm in more ways than one. But that's not altogether unpleasant for a change; it makes a man feel what his manhood is worth."

Mr. Long gave Leigh Engledew's hand a hearty grasp, took leave of Mr. Wold and Richard with an expression of confidence that he should see them again before long, and of hope that they would some day soon be his guests; then, lastly, he came to diligent Isabel, in her fireside corner. She rose and confronted the light, and—his eyes; but they had such a power of gentleness in them that they made her proud composure falter; he held her hand a little longer than he had ever done before, added, "May you be happy" to his good-bye, and went.

No one else was stirring, for it was late; so they heard his footfall far up the rainy street.

Isabel was conscious that she longed to rush to her own room; therefore she resumed her seat and her work.

"He is a noble fellow!" Mr. Wold said. "I don't regret a step I have taken, or a word I have spoken for him, though it was all in vain."

"We shall miss him uncommonly!" Richard said; "for it is a long time now that he has been a constant visitor."

"Yes; and, spite of his intentions to the contrary, sincere as I know them to be, our connection, in all probability, ends here. Now he has once resolved to rouse himself, he will find his own position, and a high one, in society. Surrounded by associates of his own rank, he will find it impossible to make intimate friends of ourselves—to do so would be to lose caste completely."

Mr. Wold spoke rationally, with a purpose, and according to the dictates of sense and worldly wisdom; yet, at heart, he did not give up Reginald Long's friendship.

"A fig for such friendship, say I," quoth Leigh, *sotto voce*.

"I suppose it will be so, father," Richard said, as if he felt it rather hard.

"It will not, or if it is, Mr. Long is not worthy of all you have done for him," Isabel said, speaking in spite of a resolution to keep silence; saying, too, just what she was resolving not even to think.

"Child! I have, after all, not been working so much for any person, as for a cause, for the carrying out of my own principles. People are apt to overlook this. And, Isabel, you do not know so much of the world and its ways as I do —experience makes men charitable. Notwithstanding the sincerity and warmth of real friendship with which Mr. Long parted from us, I can expect that he will gradually forget his short intimacy without abating a jot of my high esteem for him. He will do so from necessity. At present it is simply impossible for his class and our class to mingle on terms of equality—he has to learn this, and society will be very ready to teach him;" a slight bitterness tinged Mr. Wold's manner as he finished.

"Queer that," Leigh growled. "I don't see that stuff that won't bear light and wear and tear, is worth anything."

"Young people, untried by the world, are hasty in judging others. Mr. Long will not always be free to choose his own friends, simply according to his own inclination. If I am not much mistaken, he will marry before long. I have once or twice lately met him with a lady, a very sweet-looking girl."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't accept Long's offer," Leigh observed. "As it is considered to be a practice of fine friends to forget their friendship, he would no doubt have forgotten

having made it, and I should have been put to considerable inconvenience."

"What offer did Mr. Long make you, Leigh?" Richard asked.

"He said that he could get me elected organist at a cathedral somewhere, where they pay their organist well.—He couldn't secure his own election, so perhaps he couldn't have secured mine."

"For shame, Leigh! Did you actually decline?"

"Yes. I don't want to fix myself anywhere. I mean to go to London again, and I want to go abroad."

"Can you afford the latter, my boy?" Mr. Wold asked.

"Not particularly well. But I'll manage greater things than that, maybe, without Mr. Long's assistance."

"Good night, Mr. Engledew," Isabel said abruptly, without offering her hand. She submitted to her father's and brother's kiss, and went away up to her own room. She heard much of the wild storm that swept dismally round and about the old gables that night: for she thought it her duty to try and understand some things that perplexed her sorely.

CHAPTER XIV.

"WHAT WOULD YOU DO?"

"I NEVER shall forgive myself," Leigh exclaimed, bursting in upon the Wolds on a dismal February morning, in a state of great excitement.

"For what?"

"Having thought or said anything sneering against him. It was very mean. All the time I felt that it wasn't true—felt that the devil was prompting me."

"Against who? Speak, oh most mysterious stutterer!" Richard said. Isabel only did not need to ask *who?*

"Against Reginald Long."

"Why? what has he done for you?"

"What, indeed! see here!" and Leigh pulled out of his pocket a letter containing two enclosures. "The letter is as great a boon as anything—it is so manly—so Christian——" Leigh stammered out. "No nonsense or false humility, and yet somehow it seems to prevent one's feeling crushed, or even burdened, by sense of obligation. I wonder who told him about my wanting to go abroad, and all that. He seems to know all I've been thinking and hoping: there is a bit of mystery about that, Isabel. He says the money of which he asks my acceptance is a part of a sum he has set aside for the use of those to whom it may do good service, as it came into his possession in a manner which precludes the possibility of his using it for his own private expenditure."

"That partly accounts for such munificence. I do not think that Mr. Long is very rich just now," Mr. Wold remarked.

"Of course you will accept it, Leigh," Richard said.

"With hearty good will—so offered—I couldn't pain him by refusing. Now I can go to London, Paris, Germany, and I am well-nigh mad with delight." Leigh sat down and hid his face in his hand, quite overcome by joy, gratitude, and penitence.

Isabel had not spoken; she turned to the window to hide a kindling, triumphant face.

"And these letters of introduction?" Mr. Wold asked, to rouse Leigh.

"They will be invaluable," he answered, springing up, "and what trouble he has taken in procuring them! Isabel, you were right in being offended with me that night. I spoke like an envious fool." Leigh said this for Isabel only.

"What do you mean? when was I offended?" Isabel asked, turning round on him proudly.

"Oh, you know quite well," he answered. "You were angry, and you needn't be ashamed of it."

Isabel left the room. The three men discussed Leigh's plans and prospects for awhile, then departed to the day's business.

Leigh did not mean to start on his travels just yet.

Isabel was known to have a special hatred of walking through miry streets. The streets of Caiston were especially rich in their incrustation of mud that afternoon. Yet Richard found his sister equipped for walking.

"Whither away, Isabel? Your ladyship will need a page to bear up your train."

"I am going to Miss Erlridge's."

"Why?"

"Principally because I'm tired of staying indoors; so is Wolf. I shall take Miss Erlridge Clara Blanchard's letter, too."

"You never favour us with a glimpse of the contents of those pretty notes," Richard remarked, as he stirred the fire.

"No—I don't think they would edify you."

"What do you mean?"

"That they are just the 'pretty notes' one girl writes to another—they would seem silly to parties uninterested. I hate the custom of showing letters—it takes all worth from them, in my eyes."

"You are too retentive—too reserved in every way, Isabel."

"I can't stay to be lectured now, or I shall not be home before dark; so good-bye, Richard. Come, Wolf, you won't be parlour company when you come home, old fellow."

From the window Richard watched his sister pick her way along the street, closely followed by her sable attendant. He continued to look out into the dismal day long after she had disappeared.

It was holiday time again at the school. Isabel did not

find Miss Erlridge either in the great drawing-room, before the window of which hung the bare yellow stalks of the passion vine, beaded with moisture; or in the dull dining-room which looked out upon the weed-grown square—these apartments were empty and fireless. Making Wolf lie down on the mat in the hall, she went up-stairs and found Miss Erlridge ensconced in a small, snug room. She had been writing letters, and, apparently, turning over old letters, for heaps of yellowed documents lay on the table, and her gentle eyes looked more dreamy than usual. Strange eyes were those! Even when the governess sat at the head of the long school-room table, a dry lesson book in her hand, and a row of pupils on either side, those eyes would sometimes grow misty and visionary, seem to overlook all near things, and earnestly to contemplate things afar.

"My dear, how kind!" Miss Erlridge exclaimed, on seeing Isabel, who was soon made to remove her damp cloak and bonnet, and settle herself in a fireside corner.

"I did not expect you such a day, for I know you do not like mud. You have not set up your carriage, I suppose?" Miss Erlridge asked, smiling.

"Not yet. How have you been this long time, Miss Erlridge? You don't look well."

"I am not very well, but I am better than I was. I have had a long rest."

"Keeping a school must be as bad as working in a tread-mill, I think!"

"I don't suppose it would suit you, Isabel; but I can return the compliment about pale looks. What have you been doing with yourself, my dear?"

"I have been working hard. The days are so short! I have so much I want to do. Dr. Vögel is very kind—he has given me double lessons since the holidays began."

"It is false economy to work so hard. You will weary yourself out.—Are you happy, Isabel?" Miss Erlridge asked suddenly, with a clear, searching look.

Up flew the wanting colour into Isabel's face. She answered—

"No! when was I? I am restless—that is why I work so hard. It does me good. I am dissatisfied, and want I don't know what. I am feeling naughty as a spoilt child does. They are so good to me at home, yet I am often cross to Richard, sometimes even to papa. Anything irritates me. I don't know why."

"Shall I scold you? That would be no use; and I will not preach, for fear words often repeated should lose their force. You are a good girl to confess to me."

"No, I am not. I do it as a relief, for the sake of having you pity me. You are the only person I can bear to be pitied by. I think I will own to being positively miserable sometimes—quite without cause, remember—just that you may sympathise with me."

"And is the wrist that was hurt quite strong now?" This question was connected with their conversation in Miss Erlridge's thoughts: Isabel wondered how.

"Oh, yes, long since—at least, except paining a little now and then, if I practise too many hours at a time."

"I suppose you all miss your friend Mr. Long, after seeing so much of him: and you have very few acquaintance, I think."

"Do not call Mr. Long our friend. We don't want such grand friends. He, may be, would not like to be so called."

"You think not? Do you think he was only friendly while he wanted your father's assistance, then?"

"I did not say so. I even think that he is less proud and prejudiced, and does not care so much about rank and station, as a great many people do; but that is not saying much."

"I do not like your tone, love. You have not lost faith in truth and sincerity, so why pretend that you have?"

"Do I pretend so? I do not know why, I'm sure," Isabel sighed wearily.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Long since he left in December?"

"I believe they have once. He sent us game at Christmas, and Richard has heard from him. Now, why do you ask these things?" Isabel's eyes searched Miss Erlridge's face keenly.

"I like all I have heard of this Reginald Long much, and I have heard a good deal. Besides, I am interested in anyone you know, my child."

"Oh! but you may leave off being interested in Mr. Long on that score. No doubt, a few more presents and civilities will relieve him from all sense of obligation, and then we shall be quietly forgotten."

"Perverse girl! If people had said that to Isabel, she would have been very angry with them—would have scorned

their meanness, and told them that they judged others according to the low standard of themselves. I can hear you saying this."

"It would have been impertinent for anyone to say to me what I have a right to say to myself, if I think it."

"Has Mr. Long invited your father or brother to visit him?" Miss Erlridge asked. Most people would have been afraid to pursue the subject, or would have thought it unwise to do so. She wanted to know the girl's heart—to be able to judge of the extent and reason of her restless, angry unhappiness.

"He only says vaguely that he hopes to see them later in the spring; that he is fully occupied by a complication of unpleasant business now, and that Moor Hall has few attractions at this season, etc., etc." Isabel spoke in a mocking tone.—"Something also of expecting to be summoned abroad on painful concerns, I think."

"Isabel," Miss Erlridge said, after a pause, "I do not know any other girl to whom I would put the question; but I am not afraid to ask you; and you will answer me truly, love. If any man, as much your superior in position as Mr. Long, who in himself was worthy of your love, were to love you" (she had her hand in Isabel's, and felt her start), "and to ask you to be his wife—what would you do?—how would you answer him?"

"I would assuredly refuse him!" Isabel looked straight into Miss Erlridge's face with fearless eyes, but her colour went and came suddenly.—"Why do you ask me this?" she demanded. "You should not. It is not kind or wise. I do not like to talk of such things. You are mistaken, quite. I mean that nothing of the sort will ever happen to me."

Isabel was confused.

"My dear, I believe it will happen some day that you will be so circumstanced. From what I know of you, I have feared that you have made some proud, ill-considered resolution. Why should you refuse to marry a good man whom you could love, and who loved you?"

"Because I will never place myself in a position where I may be looked down upon—where I may run the risk of becoming ashamed of my former station—even of my relatives. Because I will never have a home that my father and brother will not be able to make theirs—or a husband who shall not look upon them as equals."

"Do you not believe in a love which can make all ranks

equal? Which can cast out all differences, indissolubly blend distinctive interests, and ——"

"I don't know, Miss Erlridge," Isabel interrupted. "It seems to me strange that you should talk to me about love. I do not even think about it; I believe we may live very well without it. Why did you speak of it?"

"Love is one of the great truths of life, my dear. We may choose to shut our eyes to it, but I don't see any wisdom in doing so. We are then more liable to be dazzled with excess of light when we are forced to open them. I do not know why we should ignore the existence of love more than that of death. Love is the truer and stronger thing—outlasts death, and ——"

"Miss Erlridge, were you ever in love?—Forgive me if I am rude," Isabel added penitently, when she saw the pink hue creep over Miss Erlridge's pale face, and pain gather into her eyes.

"I do forgive you, Isabel!—I do not talk of anything of which I am ignorant, my dear." And Miss Erlridge glanced at her open desk, as if *there* her secret were entombed.

Isabel knelt down before Miss Erlridge, kissed her thin hands, and pressed her own hot cheeks upon them.

"And you have never married!" she said shyly.

"For want of trust in each other, we were separated—simply from want of trust; it was mostly my fault."

"I do not believe that; you were always good!" Isabel said.

"What good is in me, Isabel, has been educed by sorrow."

"Yet you were shocked when I prayed for trial."

"Pray rather for strength to bear trial. Trial will come in God's time."

There followed a long silence.

"You have such a hard life!" Isabel sighed.

"A life which has its true pleasures. It has been one of them to have you under my care. Do you remember when you first came to school you used to sleep in my room?"

"Yes; and you kissed me every night when you came up; and you sometimes prayed over me? I wonder why you loved me? for I was not good, even to you. I never have been good—always proud and impatient; and you are so meek—so gentle. I *do* think I know what it is to be possessed by a devil!" Isabel muttered musingly, looking into the fire, by which she had resumed her seat.

"We most of us do, at some period of our lives."

"It is no consolation to be told that. If I broke my arm, it would be no consolation to be told that other people had done so before."

"It might be," Miss Erlridge answered, smiling; "other broken arms have healed, so may yours. Other devils have been cast out, so may yours be."

Miss Erlridge started just then. Wolf stalked noiselessly in at the unlatched door, coming to seek his mistress—looking of gigantic proportions in that small room.

"He thinks I have stayed long enough. But oh, bad dog! he has left such dirty footprints on the carpet."

"Never mind, my dear. I hope, Isabel, your Familiar may be of no worse spirit than this noble creature. But make him keep his distance. I am not very brave."

"I must go now," Isabel said, rising. "I see they have lighted the lamps already in the streets."

"Where did Mr. Long get this dog? Do you know? I almost fancy I have seen him before."

"I do not know, except that he said it had belonged to a lady. Where do you think you saw it?"

"I cannot distinctly remember. What is its name?"

"Wolf." Isabel looked a sharp enquiry.

"I can't remember, my dear. Now go home, and come again soon."

"Here's a note from Clara for you to see. I had almost forgotten it. I will come soon. Good-bye, dear Miss Erlridge. This way, Wolf." Isabel looked back to say, "Try and remember about the dog; I am very curious, you know, and I want to learn his previous history."

Isabel had much to think of on her way home. She fancied that Miss Erlridge's past history could furnish some reason why she had always been so much beloved by her gentle governess.

CHAPTER XV.

DIVIDED INTERESTS.

"NOW play your own piece to me," Leigh Engledew said, as one early spring morning he gave Isabel her last music-lesson. "Has anyone besides Richard and your father heard it?"

"Only Dr. Vögel. We had been quarrelling with him, Richard and I. We said that the last scene of the first part of Faust—the prison scene, you know—was very superior to anything else we knew of Göethe's, and even worthy of Shakespeare. The fiery little man was immediately up in arms for his idol, exalting him above ours. The contest grew serious; for Dr. Vögel has little of the German 'Kaltsinnigkeit,' and so Richard asked me to play this piece just to put Dr. Vögel into a good temper again."

"I don't consider it has a soothing effect."

"No; it was my playing it for him that was to please him."

"I see. Did he like it?"

"He got excited over it. These foreigners give way to the kind of excitement music produces—seem to luxuriate in it, in a way I do not understand and cannot sympathise with; it seems weak and unmanly. He suggested a name, Leigh; what do you think it was?"

"I don't see the good of always keeping one's soul sheathed, as you try to do, Isabel," returned Leigh; "but what was his name?—some crack-jaw German adjective-adverb-substantive!"

"He told me to call it—'The wail of my Familiar!' What do you think of that, Sir?"

"Tolerably absurd! Now play. Let me hear your Familiar wailing."

As Isabel played this strange composition of hers—which, through many changes of triumphant fortes and dulcet pianissimos, always returned to a wailing melody of minor chords, such as, played monotonously and broken off abruptly, with-

out any satisfying harmony, were like the ceaseless cry of an impotent spirit—of a spirit wailing after each fruitless attempt to break bars of inevitable things and reach to outer freedom, light, and knowledge—Leigh grew somewhat reconciled to the German's fanciful name.

"It may be published as 'The Wail of my Familiar,' if you choose," he said, when Isabel had finished. "It isn't such a bad title, only you had better do it into German, French, or Italian; the name will go down then."

"Published! It is not going to be published; I told you so, Sir!"

"I told you that your father said he should like it published if I thought it worth publishing,—and I do."

"Thank you. But the more it is worth, the more I will keep it for my friends and myself. Anybody isn't to hear the wailing of my Familiar," she said, half-playfully, half-scornfully.

"Well, as you please. I hope you will grow more amiable before I come home, Isabel; you are the strangest girl, and the proudest, I ever met with."

"And you the queerest boy and the rudest. But I won't quarrel with you to-day."

"You cannot; for *I* shall not quarrel."

"That is to provoke me to try. Instead, write down some instructions for me, Leigh—the names of pieces that are worth learning, and of any books on composition worth studying."

"What's the good? You don't mean to be a professoress, or in any way to benefit others by all this study and culture."

"Do as I bid you, without arguing the point. I play for my friends; is not that enough?"

"A large audience that is, you being so catholic in your tendencies," Leigh muttered, as he bent over the table.

"What do you wish me to be, or do? you can tell me, although it may not make any difference. Speak! It is much easier to find fault with things as they are, than to suggest changes and remedies."

"You torment!" Leigh exclaimed, shaking back his hair, and looking up at her, as she confronted him with a piquant mixture of haughtiness and sauciness in her face and manner. "I wish you to be and do nothing but what you are already and do already, I fancy." He added, with a desperate effort at carelessness, "If I wish any change, it is one I can't speak of now."

Isabel steadily inspected him, then said—

"I do believe we are talking nonsense, and trying to be cross, because we feel how sorry we are to part, and how we shall miss each other: but that is foolish, Leigh; we will be grave. Now sit down here; I will get my work, and you must tell me about all your plans and hopes." Isabel had assumed a quiet, elder-sisterly tone. Leigh did not obey: he said he could not wait, had many things to see to, was coming in to say good-bye the last thing that evening, as he started at five next morning.

He left the room; but a moment after, was standing within the door, looking especially shy and awkward.

"May I write to you, Isabel?" he stammered out.

"Certainly, Leigh, as often as you feel inclined," she answered unhesitatingly. "I shall so like to hear of all you are doing."

"And will you answer?"

"Why—well! yes, sometimes; but I don't love writing, Leigh."

"But you promise to write sometimes?"

"Yes."

Then Leigh really went. Isabel heard the heavy hall door slammed to, and felt somewhat melancholy, as she mused—

"How I shall miss that boy! and how I like him!" she said half aloud. Then looking at her watch, "Eleven o'clock! and I have done nothing this morning but play and talk to him!" For two hours and a half after that she scarcely looked up from her books—she was translating Dante, and was not so well versed in Italian as in German. When the lunch-tray and her father and brother awaited her in the next room, she left her books with reluctance, breaking off in a half-mastered passage.

"I have been walking with Leigh," Richard said. "It is so delicious out—such a regular spring-feeling day! You ought to take a country walk, Isabel. I would have asked you to come with us, only Leigh wanted a long talk, and he is rather shy of you still."

"You stay in the house too much, child; you are losing your colour and your appetite. I will put a stop to some of the lessons if you don't take care," Mr. Wold threatened.

Isabel, looking from the open upper lattice towards the fields and distant low hills, said she thought she would have a long ramble. It was a lovely day, and Wolf would be grateful for a dip in the river; so she was soon equipped and

started. She chose that walk which she had taken in the autumn, and not since, going by the river-side meadows.

At Wrangham Farm—a large half-occupied house, a long distance from Caiston—she stopped and went in to ask for a glass of milk. Then as she sat resting on a bench beneath an an old, wide-spreading walnut tree, she thought over, and wondered over, the story of gentle and pale Miss Erlridge's life.

She fancied how many a love-tale had, doubtless, been told beneath that tree, and she looked up at its yet bare but budding branches, and marvelled about this strange thing—love.

"It is nonsense, Wolf—very well in its way; but made a great deal too much fuss about. I daresay it is pleasant enough to know oneself to be loved entirely, supremely—" A rosy smile dawned on Isabel's face—"but we can do without this love—passing well, nevertheless. Come, good dog!" So finished Isabel's reverie, and she rose and pursued her journey.

She would try for a new way home, she thought. So she did not turn into the well-remembered lane; but crossed a stile, a fair green meadow, and a little wooden bridge over a stream, and followed a narrow path that went through a tiny fir-wood and wound up another meadow; she found that the field path led only to a "cottage of gentility," bowered in shrubberies, its gardens gay with spring flowers. Isabel discovered that she was trespassing; she had taken a wrong turning. She was about to retrace her steps hastily; but Wolf was gone up the field, had jumped the green garden paling, and disappeared in the shrubbery.

"How provoking!" Isabel said, as she followed him to the garden rail, calling "Wolf" repeatedly.

When she came to the paling she saw the dog wagging his tail delightedly, and leaping upon a young girl, who returned his caresses very cordially—evidently they were old acquaintances.

On seeing Isabel, the young lady immediately came towards her.

"How kind of you to bring Wolf to see me," she said. "I have been hoping that you might do so one of these lovely days. I heard that you sometimes took long walks."

"You are mistaken in thinking that I came here on purpose—I took this road by accident, not knowing that it led only to this house," Isabel answered wonderingly.

"Oh!" The two girls regarded each other with a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment. Wolf looked first at one, then at the other. "I do perceive here a divided duty," the stranger quoted, with a sweet frank smile that made her face appear lovely. Something in the quick fading out of the smile, and the saddened expression that settled on the mouth after it, reminded Isabel of Reginald Long.

At this moment a form, like that of a black-robed ghost, appeared on the veranda outside the house, and an alarmed, warning voice cried—

"Mary! Mary!"

"I am coming," and "I must go!" the girl exclaimed, hurriedly. "I am so glad to have seen Wolf; we are old friends; I was so sorry to be obliged to part with him;"—she stooped to pat his head, then paused—"I wish I might ask you in, or to come again," she began hesitatingly. "I think I might *you*, but I do not know. Mamma ——"

"I am sorry I mistook my path—at least, not sorry if it has given you pleasure," Isabel said, with stately courtesy, added a "Good afternoon," called the dog, and turned away.

"Mary" caressed the dog once more; then bidding him hie after his new mistress, she went into the bowery cottage.

Isabel retraced her steps, and went home by the old road full of thought.

"He was going to that cottage when I met him here, no doubt," she pondered. "Well! I am glad I have been there. She is a lady-like, pleasant girl. I wonder why she looks sad. I suppose that lady in black was her mother; I do not think she wore a widow's cap. No doubt the young lady is 'well-born,' of 'good family,' reduced in circumstances, perhaps. She has been well-educated, too; her manner is very nice. I wonder why—if—why she does not look happier?"

Then Isabel's musings grew less distinct. She wondered as to the meaning of several well-remembered words and looks of Mr. Long's, about which she had not before allowed herself to think; yet the involuntary recollection of which had once or twice flushed and brightened her face as she stood before her glass. How did he speak to and look at this "Mary?" It was no business of hers. But she should be sorry to think Mr. Long capable of trifling, of being insincere; or of making unmeaning speeches, as if they meant a great deal;—simply because she wished to be able to think as well of human nature as possible; simply for this reason, of course.

Isabel instinctively felt that the inhabitants of the cottage were, for some reason, anxious to remain unnoticed and untalked of, and she determined not to say anything about her adventure either to her father or to Richard.

"Mr. Long has been here this afternoon," she was informed directly she got home.

Isabel immediately thought—"Then 'Mary's' face will soon brighten up, I daresay."

"Mr. Long startled me," Mr. Wold said. "I was told that some one was waiting up-stairs to speak to me, and when I came into this room I saw no one here till Mr. Long emerged from the music-room. He has left a bit of pencilled paper in your Dante; he explained to Richard how you had not quite caught the spirit of some passage you had been translating."

Isabel looked displeased.

She opened her book and read a simple and just translation of the lines she had been bungling over, when obliged to go to lunch.

"Is it all right?" Richard asked.

"Yes; but I would rather have puzzled it out myself. I should not have left my books about if I had thought that anyone would take the liberty of interfering with things in this room."

"I believe papa kept Mr. Long waiting some time—you and he were good friends—and I suppose he wanted something to amuse him. But don't be savage and ungrateful—for Long brought a beautiful plant for your conservatory. Come and see it."

She went and stooped over it marvellingly. It was a tall, well-grown, white azalea, one mass of fragrant blossom. "It is very lovely," she murmured.

"I hope all Reginald Long's attentions won't turn your head," Richard said. "It is rather dangerous."

"Dangerous!" echoed Isabel, lifting her face from among the blossoms, and turning on her brother scornfully. "Pray what may you mean?"

"Do not be angry."

"No, I suppose I ought to be grateful for your caution and the very gentlemanly way in which it was conveyed."

"I did not mean to offend you; only sometimes girls are apt to think such attentions mean more than they really do."

"I believe I am in no danger of making any such mistake.

I think I am able to understand these 'attentions' in the proper way."

"That is right. You see, Reginald Long's position is so different from ours—he belongs to quite another ——"

"I know all that perfectly well!" Isabel interrupted, haughtily. "I do not need to be reminded of these things, I assure you."

"Allow me to beg pardon of your majesty!" Richard bowed, doing laughing homage. But Isabel swept out of the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FLOWER SHOW.

"WHAT makes you look so grave, child?" Mr. Wold inquired, as Isabel bent her brow over one of Clara's notes. Very often those notes still came, spite of the few replies they elicited.

"Clara is in great trouble, papa. Mrs. Blanchard has been ill for some time; now is getting worse so rapidly that they almost fear she is dying." Isabel spoke the last word timidly, glancing up with tearful eyes.

"The mother of so many children!—how sad! What is her complaint?"

"Consumption—and she looked such a healthy woman."

"Who is there to help Miss Blanchard nurse her mother?" Richard asked.

"No one."

"Couldn't you go? Wouldn't it be kind to offer to go?" Richard suggested.

"I should not think of offering to go," was Isabel's decided reply.

"I think you would offer, if your professed friendship were worth anything," Richard said sharply, his face flushing as he spoke.

"The friendship is not of my seeking—I have never made any 'professions.' No doubt the Blanchards have plenty of relations to be with them at such a time. My offering to go would be very officious under the circumstances," Isabel answered, stiffly.

"'Under the circumstances,'" mocked Richard; "what circumstances?"

"Our different positions considered, I should not dream of going to Burton Lacey unasked."

"It is that confounded pride of yours, as I thought; pride that apes humility—it is your pride that makes you stop to look at things in this artificial, false light, instead of acting on generous, womanly impulse—forgetting yourself, and thinking only of your friend who is in trouble ——"

"Gently, Richard!" Mr. Wold said. "You forget that you are speaking to your sister: your tone is not that in which you should speak to any woman. I do not see why you upbraid Isabel so fiercely."

"Pray, do not interrupt him, papa.—You are certainly quite mistaken in one respect, Richard; my pride does *not* ape humility: prides itself, perhaps, on being pride. It is not because I think myself inferior to the Blanchards that I will not act as an equal; but because I have too much self-respect to put myself in a position where that self-respect might be wounded. As to acting on generous impulse, I have learnt better."

"Isabel—children—hush!" Mr. Wold interposed. "Your last was a false, foolish speech, daughter; you have not learnt better than to act on generous impulses; if you had, I should be sorry to call you a child of mine. I agree with you in thinking that you cannot well go to Burton Lacey uninvited; but I do not at all like the haughty tone you have assumed towards your brother."

There was silence now. Isabel was angry; Richard sorry that he had drawn rebuke upon her. Mr. Wold returned to his newspaper, and presently exclaimed—

"Richard! Sir Watkins Darrall is dead."

"The country will not miss him," Richard replied.

"So his son is Sir Wilton Watkins now, and master of Alderton Park."

"Unfortunately, the son is no improvement upon the father; and he is clever enough to be able to do mischief, while the old man was very harmless."

"I believe the old man was a kind husband, and an only too indulgent father; he will be missed and mourned in the family circle—it is well to remember this."

"Have you read Wilton's speech in the House? It is eminently characteristic—so neat, plausible, and politic! I should not wonder if he becomes a popular man!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Wold, "what a strange coincidence—the speech your refer to was made on the very night the old man died. I suppose Sir Watkins was carried off suddenly—he looked a likely subject for apoplexy."

"He did."

"Immediately beneath the black-rimmed paragraph announcing Sir Watkins' death, and giving a short eulogistic sketch of his life, is an advertisement of the first flower-show of the season, to be held to-day in the Fairleigh meadows."

"A pleasant place for it. I had forgotten all about it. Long asked if we were going, and offered us tickets; but we have our own. Will you go, Isabel?" Richard asked, anxious to make peace.

"Not for my own pleasure. *I* do not care to go."

"You may as well go, my dear. I do not know why you should never mix in these little gaieties. Such indifference to them is not right or natural at your age. You will grow old too soon," Mr. Wold said. "Young people should take a little pleasure now and then."

"Pleasure! gaiety!" echoed Isabel, scornfully. "I don't see much gaiety or pleasure in being pushed about by a fashionable crowd. So delightful too, isn't it? to go into society, where I feel myself shrunk from by those who wonder what possible right *I* have to be in such good company! To see—as I saw at one of those 'conversaziones' last winter—old dowagers regard my father with a horrified, incredulous stare; then draw back from him, shudderingly, to huddle together, and mutter very audibly about the '*mixture* to be met in these places'—'the unpleasantness of being brought into such close contact with one's tradespeople'—'the shocking confusion of classes now-a-days,' and so on. Very delightful this! Ah! I turned and looked at those old *ladies* in such a way that they could not doubt that I had heard their remarks."

Isabel laughed bitterly; her face kindling as, no doubt, it had done then.

"Isabel, you have a talent for hearing disagreeable things," her brother remarked. "I think sometimes that you must imagine many of these things that annoy you. I know there is a good deal of that kind of feeling among Caiston people, especially among the old dowagers; but I believe you unconsciously exaggerate, and meet annoyances half way."

"Annoyances! Do you know I enjoyed the little scene with the old ladies, especially their discomfited shrinking away from my steady look!"

"Let us drop this subject," Mr. Wold interrupted, with a pained expression. "Richard, you have finished breakfast, will you see if the letters are come? Isabel"—he turned to her when Richard was gone—"my child, I implore you do not cherish these scornful bitter feelings. You are undermining your own happiness—perilling your peace and your virtue. My darling, you make me very unhappy!"

"Indeed, papa, I do not mean to do that—I *am* cross this morning, certainly." After a pause: "I will go to this flower-show—anywhere you wish, anywhere with you. You will go?" There was sudden, irresistible, penitent sweetness in her face; this power of swift, complete change of expression was one of its great charms.

"Yes, I will go; and so will Richard—so you shall be well defended from the pushing of the fashionable crowd." Kissing his daughter, Mr. Wold left the room.

From some perverse motive, Isabel dressed herself for the flower-show much more plainly than was her custom. Richard wondered, but did not venture to make any comment. "Shall I see the mysterious 'Mary' with Mr. Long?" Isabel secretly marvelled.

On entering the enclosed and gaily-thronged meadows, Mr. Long was one of the first persons Isabel saw—Mr. Long surrounded by some ladies and gentlemen belonging to the "aristocracy of the neighbourhood." Among them Isabel could not discover "Mary," or the ghostly-looking lady, her mother.

Isabel avoided meeting Mr. Long's eyes; and hurried her father, who had not seen him, in another direction.

Later in the afternoon, when they again approached Mr. Long's party, Mr. Wold asked, "Why do you pull this way, Isabel?"

"I don't want to meet all those people."

"Do you know who any of them are, Richard?" his father asked.

"Oh, yes, I know them all by sight; they are all customers of ours. That very handsome girl, to whom Mr. Long is talking, they say he is going to marry. I should imagine that *she*, at least, is quite willing."

"Hush! they are close to us. That is not the lady I have seen with him."

The two parties met. Mr. Wold and Richard bowed to Mr. Long; he half stopped, but then went on, for Isabel looked another way steadily,—would not see him; she being very conscious the while that Mr. Long's eyes were upon her, and that one or two eye-glasses were quizzically inspecting her, their owners wondering who Long's friends could be. A gentleman lingered behind the rest of the party, and came up to Isabel.

"Miss Wold, I believe. Clara wouldn't forgive me if I did not find an opportunity of speaking to you. I hope you are well."

"Very well, I thank you. Mr. Percy Blanchard, my father and brother." The elegant Percy acknowledged the introduction, and walked by Isabel's side for a few moments.

"Mrs. Blanchard is better, I suppose, as you are able to leave home. I was sorry to hear from your sister this morning of her serious illness."

"Yes, she was considerably better when I came away. I hope she will be all right in a few days," Percy returned.

"I am glad to hear you say so. From what Clara wrote, I feared her illness was very serious indeed."

"Oh, Clara is easily frightened; she is a regular little coward. I shall be returning to-morrow morning. Can I take any message or anything for you?"

"Nothing, I am obliged to you."

"Aw. Well, then, I must wish you good-afternoon, and join my party." He bowed and turned off in another direction hurriedly, as some young men of his acquaintance approached, by whom he did not wish to be seen talking to the hosier's daughter—though she was, so he assured himself, as beautiful and lady-like looking a girl as any there.

"What a fop!" Richard commented.

"He is not so bad as he was when I had the honour of seeing him at Burton Lacey. Foreign travel has much improved him," Isabel said. "I wonder where his second brother is? He was so different—such a quiet, studious, intelligent boy."

"Let us sit down here, and quiz the people," Isabel proposed presently, and she placed herself on a seat in a retired corner of the meadows, having her father and brother on either hand.

"Quizzing is not an improving occupation for you, Isabel," Richard said. "'Spiritual dissection,' some one calls it; it's dangerous pastime."

"It is the only amusing thing to be done at these kind of assemblies. To sit and look on at the people as if they were playing parts purely for our amusement—to watch their arts and ways, and see through their manœuvres—is very edifying."

"This looking on should be done in a kindly, sympathising spirit, to be an innocent amusement, Isabel," Mr. Wold remarked, adding—"Perhaps it is difficult to help feeling superior to those whose devices one sees through; but there is a great difference between entertaining a Mephistophelian, half-triumphant scorn, and a wondering, sorrowing pity: one

is a devilish, the other an angelic, feeling. I have curious thoughts often, when I am thrown among a busy, gay multitude of any kind," Mr. Wold went on, watching the fluttering throng passing at a little distance. "Sometimes I picture to myself our Master suddenly appearing to such an assembly as this. How all worldly distinctions would disappear in His presence! How all beauty but the beauty of holiness would fail! How all fashion would feel itself folly! What a test it would be to apply to all our pursuits and pleasures, should we be willing that He should appear to us while we are engaged in them!"

Silence followed Mr. Wold's words.

Near the gate, as they were leaving the meadows, they once more encountered Mr. Long and the two ladies on whom he had seemed to be in special attendance. Isabel a third time resolutely avoided his notice.

A day or two after the flower-show, Isabel, on her way home from Miss Erlridge's, went to the Cathedral. She was in a softened and serious mood—the usual result of gentle Miss Erlridge's affectionate talk. It was an afternoon of warm, slow-dropping rain; and Isabel, restless and of a changeful spirit, did not want to go home yet. The old Cathedral was a haunt of hers, and was little out of her way; so, the rain increasing, after she had lingered in the quiet yard awhile, she entered the building. It was quite empty this afternoon, and she spent a long time pacing the dim aisles, wrapped in tender-hued, mystical reveries, then left their mouldy coolness for the fresher air of the cloisters. The rain ceased, and the sunshine smote aslant one-half of the green enclosure; it reached to the side of the cloister in which she walked. It fell so suddenly and warmly upon her cheek, that she looked up in almost superstitious surprise. Her thoughts travelled upwards upon that sunshine, upwards to the Heaven whence it came, and to her mother. Love! love! infinite love, Isabel's heart craved then. Of Infinite Love, once made manifest, Miss Erlridge had been talking to her; and some of Miss Erlridge's words served as text for Isabel's Cathedral thoughts.

The sunshine left Isabel's face, touched one sculptured stone, one ivy-leaf, after another, creeping higher and higher up as the sun lowered. Soon it touched nothing in those cloistered shades; but the thoughtful girl still paced them softly and slowly. Isabel's cheek was paler, her hands were colder, her blood flowed more slowly than usual, when, quite

late, she let herself out of the little side door of the Cathedral. She had not known how late it was till she saw by the western sky—barred with crimson on the horizon, higher up clear and opal-hued—that the sun had set. The shadow of the place was still upon her, a twilight peace round her, when suddenly she met Mr. Long.

He stopped so decidedly, though he had been hurrying in another direction, that Isabel was forced to stop too.

"I have been to your house this afternoon. I was very sorry you were not at home; a lady was with me whom I wish you to know. It is long since we have had a word together," he added, looking heartily pleased at this meeting. "Are you going home? May I walk with you, then? Pray why would you not honour me with one glance when we met last?" he asked, as Isabel accepted his offered arm.

In her present mood that "Why" seemed contemptible—absurd.

"You were with people whom I knew would feel astonished that you should have any such unaristocratic acquaintance," Isabel said softly, giving a true reason, and feeling very much ashamed of it, as her vivid blush proved. What right had he to look at her as he did when she said this? It was only his way. His eyes could not help looking *so*, perhaps. Dangerous eyes these!

"I was with people, one of whom was worthy of your acquaintance, Miss Wold," he answered gravely. "To her I wished to introduce you; but you gave me no opportunity; and to-day I have again been unfortunate. You allowed Percy Blanchard to stay by you."

"He only wished to know if I had any message for Clara." Isabel, for a moment, quite forgot that Mr. Long had no possible right to expect any explanation.

"Well, my purpose has been attained anyhow; you have promised to favour Moor Hall with a visit—that is, your father has promised for you. My aunt, the lady to whom I alluded, settled it all with him. We would hear of no refusal. I feel sure that you and my Aunt Mary will suit each other remarkably well."

"Mary is a beautiful name," Isabel said quietly. She was too much astonished at this visit having been so suddenly arranged to know exactly what she did say. It was very odd of her father to go. But why should she mind? perhaps the "Mary" would be there.

"I know two Marys—both worthy of the name, though

very different in every other way. By-the-bye, how is it our friend Wolf is not with you?"

"I have only been sitting with Miss Erlridge and staying in the Cathedral this afternoon. So Wolf could not come."

"If you should ever lose him, let me know. It is very likely I should be able to find him for you. Do you often go to the Cathedral? I used to go there often with my mother."

Isabel raised her eyes in soft sympathy to Mr. Long's face. "You loved your mother very much," she said, adding, "This afternoon I have been thinking a great deal of mine."

"Yes, I loved my mother very much," was answered simply.

"How could you bear to lose her, then? I want to know how people bear things they sometimes have to bear. I was very young when mamma died. I do not think I could bear suffering of that sort."

And Isabel shuddered instead of looking out with triumphant defiance, as she did sometimes.

"God forbid that you should suffer!—that is ——" Mr. Long paused rather strangely.

"I hardly feel that I *have* lost my mother," he said presently. "Perhaps I have grown fanciful in my solitary life —I have often felt her present with me."

A star was glimmering in the opal light above the crimson bars. Mr. Long's eyes were fixed upon it. His young companion pondered over his last words, and glanced at his gentle, serious face reverently. When he turned to her again, it was with a wholly changed manner.

"Do you remember startling me by a sudden question one evening last autumn?"

"No."

"You asked me had I ever put my whole energy into any effort. If I had time to tell, and you had interest enough to listen, I could plead some things in excuse of the faults you have found in me. But again I thank you for that frank question. You women little know how much of the world's work you do indirectly. Very different the world would be, if only more of you were true to yourselves and earnest in your lives. Miss Wold, I am very sad and sorry in society sometimes."

"Are you, Mr. Long? I think I should be, but it is not we women only who need to be more earnest and true."

"Certainly not; but women should be the good angels,

pointing our way to purer, higher life. All works of regeneration and purification must be begun by women in the sanctuary of home."

"I do not think that men half believe what they say of our power," Isabel said. "I laugh at what I read on this subject sometimes. It is as if men threw us sugar-plums of flattery to keep us good."

"I confess that I have often received the same idea. What are your views on this matter? I mean with regard to the relative spheres of men and women?"

"I have not any."

"You mean you have not as yet—but here we are. May I come in with you? I should like to stay an hour or two, and hear a little music."

"No doubt papa will be glad to see you again; but you were hurrying somewhere when ——"

"I shall go there by-and-by," Mr. Long said quickly. How would "Mary" like this, thought Isabel.

CHAPTER XVII.

VISITORS AT MOOR HALL.

"OF course, Reginald, as these are guests whom you delight to honour, I shall do all I can to make your house pleasant for them; but I think you are very eccentric—I don't pretend to understand you." The speaker was a pleasant-looking lady of about forty, with an unwrinkled and ample brow, kindly brown eyes, and clear, dark complexion. She presided at Mr. Long's breakfast-table, at Moor Hall, on a fair May morning.

"You see, aunt, I have no one but myself to please," Reginald returned smilingly. The smile died as he added, 'we have no right to be proud, or to value people save for their individual merit."

"I do not see how you can say that you have no one but yourself to please, when you have that fair young creature dependent upon you! You must consider her in any connection you may form."

"That I will certainly do. Be assured I shall never wittingly take any step that can endanger Mary's happiness, or in any way interfere with her prospects."

"I don't believe you will, Reginald. But what is your fancy for these Wolds? for making me call upon them and asking them here? It *is* a strange proceeding!"

"I have received a great deal of kindness from them. I like them—we suit each other."

"But, Reginald, you are so fastidious and cultivated—they are very good sort of people in their way, no doubt, but what advantages have they had? What sympathy can there be between you and them? Why should you be so anxious for me to know the girl?"

"Wait till you see them, and judge for yourself," was answered, with a smile of quiet confidence.

"But I have heard from the Darralls—of course not lately, we have not been on visiting terms since the election

—but I have heard from them and others—the Raveys, for instance—that Isabel Wold is an intensely disagreeable girl."

"I daresay she is disliked by some people : she is very proud, and can, I know, be very repellent and frigid."

"Of what is she proud? It is that which puzzles me in these sort of people."

"Don't generalise in that dreadful way. You do not know what sort of people Miss Wold belongs to. I believe it is just her peculiar position that has fostered a constitutional pride. All allowances should be made for her. In different circumstances—if she were happy and at ease—I mean ——"

"What is the peculiarity of her position?" Miss Long asked, coming to her nephew's relief, for he paused and seemed embarassed.

"Why, she is superior to those who would associate with her—to those who are considered to be her equals in social standing. Yet an insurmountable barrier of prejudice shuts her out from the society of others whose refinement and cultivation are certainly no greater than her own, but who are held aloof by the difference of 'class.' What between her self-respecting pride and their class-respecting pride—why!——" Mr. Long broke off with an expressive gesture. "It is no case of Mahomed and mountain, but of mountain and mountain."

"I hope I am not illiberal, Reginald, but ——"

"Then, too, Miss Wold is a motherless girl, and necessarily lonely," Reginald continued. "Do, Aunt Mary, try and like her, spite of her haughtiness—*you* can conquer all that."

"Well, I will try what I can make of her, to please you. Shall you have company while the Wolds are here? So strange to have to do the polite to a man I've so often bought gloves of!"

"I shall have things just as usual—ask whoever you like. I do not invite people to be my guests, and then keep them secluded, as if I were ashamed of them."

"How the Wilmots, Gowers, Molyns, and all that set will stare at being asked to meet the hosier and his son and daughter. I am afraid your friends will not receive many return invitations."

"They will not stay long, I am afraid; so that will not signify. You know I always rather enjoy shocking people's snobbish prejudices; you will help me to take care that our

guests receive no slights while they are in my house—that nothing happens to wound their feelings while they are under my roof."

"Certainly I will, Reginald."

"Now I must be off. I have a great deal to see to before they come. By-the-bye, was the piano tuned yesterday?"

"No; the man did not come."

"I must send again then; it is out of tune, and Miss Wold plays very beautifully."

Miss Long looked after her nephew, as he rode down the avenue of pine-trees; throwing up the window she heard him singing on his way, "Die schönsten Augen!"

"I am glad to see him in such spirits, spite of everything," she thought. "After all said and done, he is right. Our family is not one that has reason to be too particular. Miss Wold's father is an honest citizen—a respectable man." Here came a pause and a heavy sigh. "Reginald's......Well, Reginald is a fine fellow, and knows his own business best. I am sure I only wish him happy!"

Miss Long was twenty years younger than her brother—Reginald's father; and there had been but little intercourse between them at any time. For years "Old Long" had been living abroad: the world believed him dead.

Aunt Mary left the window to bustle about the house, and see that all things were in perfect readiness for these guests of her nephew's, about whose accommodation he had been so wondrous anxious.

Very pleasant and hospitable was the welcome given to the Wolds by Mr. Long and his aunt, in the portico, at the sweetest hour of a golden May afternoon.

And the fair afternoon sunshine was filling Isabel's eyes. "She doesn't look so proud after all!" thought Miss Long, as she gazed admiringly at Isabel, who lingered and turned back on the doorstep to look at the tops of the old pines all glorified in the sunshine, and at the glimpses of far-stretching purple moor to be caught between them. By his mistress stood Wolf, also admiring the prospect. He had come by special invitation; and had given plenty of trouble on the journey.

"Isn't it beautiful? I am so fond of this place of Reginald's. How glad I am you have such a lovely afternoon: first impressions are everything," Miss Long said, joining Isabel.

Isabel bowed slightly.

"Now, my dear, come with me; I'm sure you are tired—I'll show you your room—from it you get the same view, only better. Give me this."

"I will carry it, thank you," Isabel answered, quietly resisting Miss Long's attempt to relieve her from a shawl she carried over her arm. The tone of these few words, almost the first Isabel had spoken, convinced Miss Long of her dignified ladyhood, and rather repelled her too.

She led Isabel up the broad staircase to a very large, sunny, and nicely-furnished room.

"This *is* beautiful!" Isabel said, walking straight to a window, and looking out eagerly.

"Reginald said you would like this room best, because of the view," Miss Long observed, as she unfastened her visitor's cloak. "My dear, excuse me if I don't treat you like a stranger. I have heard a good deal of Isabel Wold—not always in her favour, I tell you candidly—but I believe I shall like you, notwithstanding. Let me unfasten this box.—Do you choose to be independent?"

"I have been always accustomed to wait upon myself."

"So have I; I hate to be under the hands of a lady's maid. Now, can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Then I will go, and look in again presently, to see if you are ready. How long do you take to dress?"

"Something less than half-an-hour," Isabel answered, smiling.

"That is the first smile you have given me, and I like it. I thought you looked grave for such a young thing." Miss Long paused, and Isabel smiled again at the frank manner of this speech. "I believe I must kiss you, my dear!" Miss Long exclaimed, and came back to do so; then she really went, leaving Isabel with a glow upon her cheek, and warmth at her heart, and yet a great deal of wonder in her brain.

This was indeed a pleasant reception.

Isabel had been ready some minutes, when Miss Long came to conduct her down stairs. She was dressed in a well-fitting and fresh-hued silk, which suited her exactly, and looked pretty and spring-like; and she wore some very beautiful old lace, which had belonged to her mother, on her neck and arms. She was gazing out of the window again. She turned, when Miss Long entered; looking ex-

quisitely sweet, her white brow serene, her dark eyes sunny; and there was a delicate glow of colour on each cheek.

"I have a most feminine love of old lace, strong-minded as some people consider me!" Miss Long said to Isabel. "Pardon my noticing it, but how beautiful this is, my dear!" and she inspected Isabel's closely.

"It was my mother's."

"Is it long since you lost her?"

"More than fifteen years."

"What was her maiden name? Again I must ask pardon for curiosity; but you remind me so strongly of a friend I had in my girlish days—and I wish—I half hope ——"

"My mother was called Isabel Engledew."

"How strange! When Reginald, in the winter, spoke to me about that young Engledew, I wondered if he were any connection of my friend Isabel's. No doubt you are her daughter—I will have it so;" and Isabel received another kiss. "And that young Leigh?" Miss Long asked.

"His father was a very distant relation of my mother's, I believe."

"Well! how oddly things turn out! I never saw your mother after we both left school. We went abroad, and I entirely lost sight of her."

"That was not unlikely—your positions must have been so different. School-friendships cannot often last long after school-days."

"My dear child, I hope you do not think too much of distinctions of rank. They need not hinder friendship, or other right and pleasant things," said Miss Long, smilingly.

"I think they do, if they need not."

"Well! the world is not what it should be. We must do what we can to help it over its prejudices—you might do a great deal. Come, they will be getting impatient for us to appear in the drawing-room, and I must communicate my discovery."

Reginald Long looked up when they entered, as he had looked up many times before. He came to meet his lady-guest, and gave her a second most cordial welcome to Moor Hall. She thanked him with her gracious and graceful manner, into which she put, perhaps, a dash of carelessness, to carry off a slight feeling of shy embarrassment. Miss Long had effectually disarmed her pride, meeting her so frankly and freely, and Isabel made up her mind thoroughly to enjoy this visit; the beautiful scenery and congenial

society; thinking always of the mysterious "Mary," as a safeguard against any "misunderstanding" of Reginald Long's devotion. It was nothing short of devotion, though of a very quiet, unobtrusive kind; and it was accepted benignly and easily, as if by one accustomed to, and expecting nothing less—finding it pleasant, but not attaching any particular value to it.

Isabel was queen of the household, and nothing happening to wound her and put her pride in arms—it slumbered, and she was gentle, amiable, womanly, and at her ease.

Mr. Wold and Richard looked on and became enlightened. Miss Long, finding Mr. Wold to be a gentleman, soon forgot the "strangeness" she had anticipated feeling in doing the polite to one of her tradesmen, and talked to him pretty freely about "Reginald," and Reginald's virtues and peculiarities—talked to him as to a person rightfully and reasonably interested in Reginald. Mr. Wold was well satisfied with all he heard: the father's heart beat high with pleasure and unselfish gratification. Isabel thought often of Mary—strove to remember Mary always. But some things were hard to understand.

"And I hope Miss Wold likes Moor Hall?" Mr. Long asked one evening as they two led the way down the pine-avenue: they were going to see the sunset from the moor.

"I do not think I have ever been happier!" Isabel answered gaily and frankly. The bracing wind that rushed down upon her seemed to make her step even more and more buoyant, and her eyes and colour brighter. "I have grown years younger in these few days.—Have I not, Wolf, old fellow?—Miss Long, don't you think I am become quite wild?"

"I did think so when I heard that you were up on the moor at six o'clock this morning."

"And if you had only seen Wolf running races with me. Ah! It was so glorious up there." Then turning to Mr. Long, she went on,—"I suppose it is the influence of this lovely time of year. You know the sin and care-burdened Faust says,—

'Der Frühling webt schon in den Birken
Und selbst die Fichte fühlt ihn schon;
Soll't er nicht auch auf unsre Glider wirken?'"

"It is not now that I should feel inclined to make answer,—

'Fürwahr ich spüre nichts davon!'

How strange and inappropriate the masculine pronoun seems applied to spring," he added.

"Spring has not generally been a favourite season of mine."

"I do not think it is so with most young people. You smile at my talking of young people in that way! Indeed I sometimes feel that I have ceased to be of them."

"Miss Long is speaking to you," Richard said.

"Reginald! I have only just been noticing this dog of Isabel's.—I'm no lover of dogs, though you tell me I ought to be, or I should have paid some attention to him before.—But, surely this is the very dog Mary had—the one her mother used to be so much afraid of!"

"Yes — it is the same," Reginald answered with a silencing look, turning away quickly.

"Dear me! I forgot: but it's of no consequence here. I thought it must be the same dog—all black but one white foot. So, old dog, you have another pretty young mistress now—you are fortunate, certainly."

Mr. Long looked annoyed—he was silent a little while. Then he glanced at Isabel's face held up to welcome the fresh wind.

"There is something I should like to explain to you—some day—if —— But ——" he paused embarrassed.

Isabel turned a careless, laughing countenance towards him.

"Pray don't trouble yourself — there is not the least occasion."

"Indeed there is," he interrupted, speaking low and eagerly. "You misunderstand me—I should like you to know ——"

"Mr. Long!" Isabel's eyes flashed upon him angrily—"There is and can be no occasion, I repeat, for any explanation!"

Mr. Long was silenced—for the present.

Isabel tried to attach herself decidedly to Miss Long, to hear all about the travels of which she was speaking to Richard.

"I won't tell you now; I am talking to your papa and brother. Reginald wants to show you the little school-house he has had built," Miss Long said. Isabel's great ease and carelessness made Miss Long a little anxious, and Isabel

noted, and of course quite misinterpreted, her watchfulness of herself and Reginald.

The school-house was a pretty building, nestled under the brow of the moor; the scholars, just coming out from evening school, were most profuse of respectful curtseys. Isabel was, or pretended to be, in too merry a mood to-night to care to inspect their books and talk to their mistress, as Mr. Long had asked her to do some day before she left. He did not wish to trouble her, and so they soon passed on, up towards the moor; leaving the scattered groups of children gazing after them vacantly, the mistress peering after them speculatively.

The glory of the sunset made them all grave; Isabel gravest; her spirits were so variable now! Tears were in the violet eyes when she turned away, sighing involuntarily.

All the way home she was very quiet. She walked by Mr. Long's side, and answered him sweetly when he spoke to her: she knew she had pained him, and felt penitent.

"I am afraid you are tired. Your energetic beginning of the day wearied you," Mr. Long said, as he noted her flagging step, when they were in the pine-grove again.

"How the wind has risen!" Isabel exclaimed, gazing up at the fine old trees. "That is grand—glorious;" and the paled cheek flushed with enthusiasm. "It is like a dream of the sea I had once!"

Childish simplicity and awe were in her face and attitude as she paused to listen.

"A dream! have you not seen the sea?"

Isabel did not note how Mr. Long watched her face, with what an intense look of blended love, longing, wonder.

"Oh yes! often; but never as it was in that dream."

"Tell me the dream."

"Oh no." And she walked on with a slight shudder. "I believe something disagreeable is going to happen to me," she said, after a pause.

"Not while you are under my roof—if I can help it." He almost made up his mind to make another effort to enter into an explanation.

"You will not be able to help it. Ah! here we are at home."

"Home!" Mr. Long echoed, but not aloud; he did not dare. To hear her call his house home, produced a curious sensation in him.

"A letter for you, my dear," Miss Long said, coming to

meet Isabel; she had reached the house some minutes sooner. Isabel half drew back. She took the letter reluctantly.

"This is it! This is the disagreeable thing! It has a black seal!" Isabel exclaimed. She looked at the letter with dread before she opened it. "I knew it! I will go directly! Poor, poor Clara! I must go at once!" She spoke with great eagerness, then sat down on the step of the portico, leant her head against a pillar, and covered her face with her hands.

Everybody read the note. It was only,—

"Come to me! Come to me! My mother has left me! Isabel! you must come, or I shall die, too! Oh mother, mother!"

There was only the Burton Lacey post mark to inform Isabel whence, or from whom, this came: no signature, no address; she would have known without even this clue, of course.

Isabel looked at Mr. Long first when she uncovered her face. "I must go to-night. Will you send me? This was written to our house two days since, so I *must* go to-night."

"Yes, go! go!" Richard cried eagerly; then he turned away. Reginald Long said nothing, but hurried out again.

"This is a sad, a very sad ending of your visit, my love," Miss Long said. "You are a good girl to be so quiet. Reginald is even now gone to order the carriage. There will be no delay."

"I shall accompany you there, Isabel," her father told her; "you must not travel alone at night."

"Thank you, papa."

"Now, my dear, come with me, have a little rest and some coffee before you go. It is a long, long ride for you to take to-night, when you are tired already, but I like to see friendship warm and hearty." Miss Long took possession of Isabel.

"I did not know I loved Clara so much," Isabel murmured; "I do not think I am a warm friend;—but that poor child!" Here she quite broke down.

"Reginald is right—her love is worth having," Miss Long thought, as she tried to soothe her.

"Miss Wold, I must see you soon, and I trust you will be kind enough to listen to me then. God help you, and aid you in your good work!"

Those were Reginald Long's low, quick-spoken words

when he handed Isabel into the carriage, detaining her hand just a minute longer than was necessary.

Isabel only bowed her head. Her father took his seat beside her, and they drove away from Moor Hall.

Strange it was, in years to come, to look back upon this short dream-coloured sojourn at Moor Hall.

"I shall never again be so happy as I have been these few, fair days! never again, in all my life!" Isabel believed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HOUSE OF MOURNING.

JUST before sunrise Mr. Wold and Isabel reached Burton Lacey. Lights were shining in many of the windows, and they were soon admitted.

"Oh, Miss Wold, I am main thankful you are come, it's a sad, sad house," the housekeeper said, meeting Isabel in the hall. The fair dawnlight gushing in at the open door, contrasted strangely with the dirty glare of the light she carried.

"Can I do anything?—shall I stay?" Mr. Wold asked.

"If it had been yesterday—but Mr. Greville came last night, and he can do anything for everybody; though he feels more than—oh, my poor mistress! It was so hard on her and him—she longed so earnestly to see Mr. Greville, and he didn't come till too late." Mrs. Farr hid her face with her apron.

"Isabel, as I cannot be of any service, I shall go; my presence might only give trouble. I will get a little rest at the Burton Lacey Arms, and then return. God bless you, my darling! You must write to-morrow."

"Good-bye, papa, I shall come home as soon as—as I am not wanted here."

She saw him go away, then turned to Mrs. Farr, who was too troubled and bewildered to remember her usual hospitality.

"Where is Miss Glara?"

"She is in the room. She has been there 'most ever since, leastways at night, when no one wanted her; Mr. Greville is with his father, now. Oh, it's a good thing you are come. I had the thought I'd write a line myself if you didn't, for my mistress said, within her last hour, 'Send for Miss Wold, she will take care of Clara.' And the poor child is making herself ill; she has not had her dress off, or lain down since."

"Was not the death sudden, at last? I heard from Mr. Percy that Mrs. Blanchard was better."

"He chose to think so, Miss, because he wanted to take his pleasure; *now* he's cut up enough, all helpless and no good to anybody. The difference there is between our two young gentlemen!"

"Take these, if you please," Isabel said, pulling off her cloak and bonnet with trembling hands, "and then show me the room. I will go to Clara."

Mrs. Farr led the way up through the stilled house—outside a door she stopped. "She is in there praying, pretty dear! I heard words midst of her sobbing, as I came down. It seemed to quiet her, so I haven't liked to take her away."

Isabel paused at that closed door—she had never seen death. She turned so pale that Mrs. Farr said, "Perhaps, Ma'am, you'd better wait—take a glass of wine first, or shall I get you a cup of tea?"

Isabel shook her head and opened the door with gentle resolution.

The room was dim. A lamp was just dying out; but a stream of dawn came in through an ill-closed shutter—a stream of fair spring morning light, and it fell upon the calm pale brow of the dead—went a little further, and touched Clara's bright hair.

Isabel came softly up the room to the bed; but the bowed head of the living was as motionless as the upturned face of the dead.

How cold the spring dawn felt in the long unsunned chamber! Isabel paused, awed at the serenity and the beauty of what she had feared to look upon. For the first time she felt the possible blessedness of death, though she shook with the emotion that had turned her chill. "He giveth His beloved sleep."

These words she uttered half aloud, and Clara looked up with a cry.

Isabel knelt down beside her and took her in her arms.

"Oh, Isa! Isa! I thought you would not come." Clara laid her head on Isabel's shoulder in utter weariness.

They both knelt there quiet some time; Isabel took this loving, helpless girl far more into her heart than ever before, now that she was motherless.

"You must come with me," she said, after a while. Then she led Clara to her room, undressed her, made her lie down on the bed, and sat by her, looking at her, till Clara's long watchful eyes shut in sleep.

Isabel went back to that room, which had a powerful attraction for her. She stood beside the couch a long time, growing acquainted with the outward aspect of death. She laid her hand upon the dead hand: stooped to touch the dead brow with her lips: lips and hand felt cold long after. Intense longing to know the absolute rest, of which this death appeared to be the type, awoke in her. She bowed her head and prayed.

There was a stealthy stirring through the house now; it was full daylight. Any sound jarred with Isabel's solemn thoughts beside that form, and she left the room.

At the door she met Greville.

"Is my poor sister here?" he asked.

"No; she is asleep."

"Thank God! I felt sure you would come to us in our grief, Miss Wold."

"I was from home—the letter followed me, or I should have been here sooner. Tell me what I can do—for any of you, Mr. Greville?" She looked wistfully into his haggard face.

"If you would make breakfast for the children and keep them quiet, it would be a relief. Things must go on as if she were among us still."

"I will do that—anything I can."

She went away—he passed into the room she was leaving, and closed the door. He had not dared be alone there before. There was so much for him to do, and so many depended on him. Now the anguish of his spirit broke forth. He cried,—

"Mother! mother! that I did not see you before you died! They were all there beside, and you have called me your heart's darling!"

He re-read her last letter. It had been written under the prescience of death, in a tenderer strain than was her wont, and he had not understood! Poor Greville! regret embittered his grief.

Isabel saw that Clara slept still in the darkened room. She darkened it yet more, and then went down—to that breakfast-room where most was missed the pleasant, morning, motherly face of the mistress of the household. It was empty. Isabel leant her head against the window-frame, looked out over bright flower-beds that had been Mrs. Blanchard's special pride, and wept.

The servant, preparing breakfast, crept in and out noise-

lessly. Presently Isabel wiped her tears. There sounded a pattering of little feet in the hall, echoing strangely through the silence. The nurse opened the door, and led in the two little girls—the youngest darlings.

Their eyes searched the room eagerly. Seeing only Isabel, they clung to the servant, crying that they wanted mamma. They had been cheated with vain and vague pretences.

"Leave them with me—they will remember me presently," Isabel said. The servant withdrew, and the children, hand in hand, colour mounting and tears rising, stood looking at Isabel, pausing in the middle of the room.

Isabel went and knelt before them and kissed them—then brought them to her seat by the window—took them both up on her lap, and asked them about their flowers and birds.

For answer they said, "We want mamma! Where is mamma?"

Isabel thought she would try and tell them something of the truth. How she sought about for simple, sincere words! How humbled and self-distrustful she felt in presence of these little ones!

"Listen, dear children. Your mother loved me, and she wished that I should come to you, so you must love me too. You must be quiet and good, for everyone is ill and sad, and your mamma is gone—gone where, I think, she can still see you and know if you are good."

So many childish questions—so many mysteries asking solution! Isabel! Isabel! you have not the faith as a little child, which only could suggest answers to satisfy these little children!

But Isabel showered kisses upon the fair heads and tearful eyes. She had been a favourite with them before, and they soon remembered her; so she was able to keep off their tears and persuade them to eat their breakfast. Before this was finished, the two poor lads, Walter and Henry, came in, both with downcast looks and swollen eyes. But it was a surprise to see Isabel. They had not known that she was come; and, though her subdued sympathising greeting unmanned them for a moment, that room looked less dismal for them than it had done for many a day. Isabel found something for them to do, too, presently. She asked them to ride down to the Burton Lacey Arms for her with a note, to be given to her father, if he had not yet started on his return. The boys went. They had not stirred out for days before.

When the nurse fetched the children, to take them for their morning walk, they left Isabel reluctantly.

"Make some hot coffee, and bring it to Miss Blanchard's room when I ring her bell," Isabel said to the servant, as she was going up to Clara again.

"Shall the things be left for Mr. Percy and Mr. Greville?" the servant asked, glad, in that unmistressed house, to recognise a tone of authority.

"Yes. Has Mr. Blanchard breakfasted!"

"Not yet: he keeps his room entirely, Ma'am."

Isabel felt her position in the house somewhat strange. She had time to think now, as she sat by Clara, watching for her awaking, and dreading it. Clara slept till noon. After that, Isabel thought of nothing but how to comfort her friend—to soften the acute agony of recollection. She ventured one question only—whether there were no relation of the family who ought to be sent for? This provoked passionate entreaties from the poor worn-out girl that Isabel would not leave her, and declarations that she wanted no one else; that there was no one whom she would not hate to have instead of Isabel. Isabel soothed her with caresses and promises. Presently Isabel received an intimation that Mrs. Farr wanted to speak to her as soon as she was disengaged. Clara, grown calmer, lay reading her mother's Bible, which she had asked Isabel to get her, and, from very weakness, was likely to fall asleep again. Isabel—promising speedy return, in answer to a pleading look from eyes that followed her every motion—went down-stairs.

She went into the breakfast room to ring for Mrs. Farr, and there, lying on a sofa, his face turned from the light, she found Percy Blanchard. She was hastily leaving the room again, when she heard so deep a stifled groan that she paused, compassionate.

"Mr. Percy!" No answer. She went a step or two nearer, and repeated his name.

He looked up at her, and then buried his head in the cushions, sobbing like a child.

"Mr. Percy! could you not rouse yourself? There is so much that should be done—your brother is quite worn out." She spoke gently but firmly. He sat up and looked at her with a stupid expression on his face.

"You are the eldest son. You ought to act as the master, and to save your father all needless pain. Mrs. Farr wants advice about several things. Will you see her?"

"Oh, no! settle everything, Miss Wold, or let her do as she likes, only leave me alone."

"It is impossible that I should arrange everything. I have no experience to guide me, and I have no authority here. I think for *her* sake you ought to rouse yourself."

"Do not speak of her—it is so terrible."

Isabel's eyes were kindling with scorn, as she stood leaning on the table that stood between them. Percy saw it.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, assuming somewhat of composure.

"Just exert yourself, and spare your father and brother. Your brother is but a delicate boy, and your father's loss is surely the greatest. He needs every consolation. You must exert yourself for the sake of others."

"You are very compassionate of Greville—but—well, you may send Mrs. Farr to me, Miss Wold."

"One thing I want to know, Mrs. Farr," Isabel said, when she had found her in the housekeeper's room, "Is there no lady who would come and stay here—no near relation, or intimate friend?"

"No, Miss Wold. Both master and my poor mistress were only children, and that makes the family seem sort of friendless."

"And had Mrs. Blanchard no intimate friend who would come?"

"Mrs. Long was the only very dear friend my mistress had, and she has been dead many a year. My poor mistress was so content in her family, and wrapped up in her children, that she never made many friends, you see."

"Then you can think of no one?"

"No, Ma'am. My mistress, I know, had been turning this over in her mind when she asked me to send for you. And, if you please, if you can stay and take the management of all, for a bit, you will be doing a kind thing—that I think! There's nobody Miss Blanchard sets such store by. And what I wanted to see you for was to say that Mr. Blanchard desired his thanks to you for your goodness in coming, and begs that you will see to and order everything proper for the mourning. He told me to look upon you as mistress for the present, and to consult you in everything."

"But, Mrs. Farr, I am young and quite without experience."

"You're the sort of lady that makes people have confidence

in their knowing everything. I have no doubt all will be right; but I will go with you to the shops, Ma'am, and do anything I can."

"Thank you. And now will you be kind enough to go to Mr. Percy in the breakfast-room, and tell him that he must give his orders about the funeral?"

"I am afraid it's no use; he's so selfish in his sorrow."

"Go to him—he was a little roused."

"You see he feels so bad because it was his fault that poor Mr. Greville did not see his mother before she died," Mrs. Farr said. "He undertook to write for him to come; but all along he did not choose to believe that his mother was dying, and put off writing after everyone thought he had done it. When the doctor said the end was drawing on fast, and that my mistress could not live, may be, not two hours, it came out that Mr. Greville had never been written for. That was the bitterness of her last hour to my poor lady: she had been watching for him so eager. He was always her favourite."

"Poor mother!—poor son!" thought Isabel. Then she returned to Clara. It seemed that responsibility was thrust upon her; she would try to bear it with worthy dignity. But it was a most anxious, weary life that she led at Burton Lacey for the next few days. The strain upon her energies never relaxed, and she could not sleep even when she tried; yet in after years it was a blessed thing to look back upon this time when she had so heartily served others. Isabel always did thoroughly what she did at all; so she took the cares and griefs of the whole family upon her. As she had told Mrs. Farr, she was young and inexperienced, and it was a heavy burden to bear. The little she could do for those most sorely in need of soothing, fretted her. A sense of powerlessness is *the* acute agony of spirits that have not learnt to submit themselves and all their interests to the Infinite Power; to do what they can, and trust for all beyond.

CHAPTER XIX.

PLAIN DEALING.

IN a little while, life went on as usual at Burton Lacey. Those who mourned seldom spoke the name of her they mourned; and it might have been fancied that she was being fast forgotten from among them.

Mr. Blanchard looked older and feebler; but his manner had lost nothing of its suave assumption; and he went about his usual occupations in his usual manner.

Percy went abroad for amusement and distraction.

Greville, treasuring a sainted memory, felt his mother still cheering him on his studious way.

The boys, Walter and Henry, returned to school.

The little girls, Rose and Ellen, grew accustomed to their black frocks, and could laugh and play in spite of them; save when at evening, or in some childish grief, the sense of motherlessness smote their hearts, and made them fly to Clara or Isabel weeping for "mamma."

Clara had been ill, and continued weak, pale, and spiritless—clinging more and more to Isabel. Isabel slept with her, and knew how the poor child, even in sleep, called upon her mother's name, lamenting bitterly.

Out-doors it was now glorious, glowing midsummer: the blue shades of the woods were vocal with the cooing of wood-pigeons; and the sea afar-off was a spot of dazzling radiance seen through glimmering heat. It was very beautiful at Burton Lacey.

Day after day, Isabel and Clara sat working and reading in the wood at one end of the turfed terrace. Isabel was languid and white-cheeked, suffering from the great heat. She crept about wearily, now all need for exertion was over. Yet sometimes at night, when Clara was reading to her father, Isabel would rush down to the terrace through the warm darkness and pace about there wildly, her brow turned

longingly towards the way of the faint breeze, that, rustling the tree tops, refused to sweep nearer to the heated earth.

At such times Isabel thought of those far-off few days at Moor Hall, and of Reginald Long's last words to her.

What did they mean? He did not dare think that she was in any danger of "misunderstanding his attentions," as Richard called it. So why should he enter into any explanation with her?

Isabel Wold's eyes flashed out black fire upon the night, and she crushed her little right foot down upon the ground fiercely, as she thought thus:

"If you have any such presumptuous thoughts, Reginald Long, do not dare hint them, or you will feel the sharpness of a woman's scorn."

Long since Isabel had heard of her father and brother's having left hospitable and pleasant Moor Hall—since then there had been no mention of Mr. Long or of his aunt in any letter Isabel had received from home. Wolf moped in her absence, she heard: he had twice been missing for some time, and on each occasion had been brought back by a man in gardener's costume, who declined giving any information as to where he had found the dog, further than that his mistress had said Miss Wold would know.

Isabel also heard that her father was not very well, and that she was sorely missed. She began to feel that she must go home; but how to reconcile Clara to the idea of parting with her she did not know.

"Decide yourself; you are the mistress, not I!" Isabel would say many times each day. Clara was inclined to give up everything to her management. Even the servants constantly came to Isabel for orders—having acquired the habit while Clara was treated as an invalid.

"Clara, dear! this cannot last much longer!" Isabel began one morning, as they occupied their usual seat in the wood. Isabel had been reading aloud, but she laid down her book very decidedly.

"What cannot, Isa?" And the startled, timid look told that Clara half guessed.

"Why, this kind of vegetating life. Our ways do not lie together, dear; we each have duties—to do them we must separate!"

"Oh, Isa! I have been dreading this!"

"Because your conscience told you the same thing—I

have been taking your place, Clara, and meanwhile mine has been empty."

"It is hard for your father, and you said he was not well. But—I do not want to be selfish; but what shall I do? I am not fit to be a mistress; I feel frightened when I think of being left here alone. If only Greville were at home!"

"Dear! It is best that he is not. He, too has his work, and cannot do yours. Take courage, Clara! If you would but trust yourself!"

"It is not only that—not chiefly that. But, Isa, I love you; I have so little to love now.—Oh, mother! mother." Clara bowed her head upon her knees and sobbed.

Isabel was prepared for this.

"Clara! you believe that your mother sees you from where she is—you know, you said that thought comforted you. Would she prefer your giving way to weak regret, or your rousing yourself to do what you can do, dear; fill her place?"

"If I could only have some great change and rest first; if I might go away and come back again fresh, I would try," Clara sobbed after a pause.

"Come home with me," Isabel longed to say. She pondered the possibility of such a proposal. At all events it must be first made to Mr. Blanchard.

"You might have change—indeed, I think, you need it. Wouldn't your father take you and the children somewhere?"

"Oh, no! He cannot bear leaving home, and he is so—so anxious away, that it is no rest to any one. Isabel!" and the sudden thought brightened all her face, "why may I not go home with you?"

"I should like it; but I do not think it is possible that I could have you. And I do not fancy that your father would consent! Think of Miss Blanchard, of Burton Lacey, domesticated in rooms over a hosier's shop in Castle Street."

"I haven't heard you say anything disagreeable of that kind for a long time, Isabel! I hoped you had forgotten how to look so proud!"

"Did you, dear?—Perhaps I have not felt these distinctions lately. Sorrow is a great leveller. But it is time that I remembered my position. I must go home soon."

The next morning Isabel had a letter from her father, in which he mentioned having taken Wrangham Farm for three months. This seemed to favour her scheme of carrying

Clara away with her: it was easier, somehow, to ask Mr. Blanchard to let Clara visit them at Wrangham Farm than in Castle Street.

After breakfast Isabel and Mr. Blanchard were alone, and it seemed a good opportunity for making her proposal.

"My father continues far from well. I cannot remain absent from him longer, Mr. Blanchard. He has taken a farmhouse some miles from Caiston. I think that if you like to allow Clara to be my guest there for a short time, the change will do her good." So Isabel plunged into the matter, not able to bring herself to any beating about the bush, or apparently humble solicitations.

Mr. Blanchard moved uneasily in his chair; his light eyes glanced timidly at Isabel, who sat just opposite him.

"This is very unexpected, and, I may say, unwelcome, news, Miss Wold. I had begun to hope that—that it might be in my power to induce you to retain a position for which you have shown yourself eminently fitted by a—I may say—natural dignity of demeanour which enforces respect, and ——" Mr. Blanchard broke down.

"I am glad if I have been of service, Mr. Blanchard—but ——"

"Allow me to explain myself!" Mr. Blanchard waved his thin hand suavely. "My daughter Clara is young and of a timid nature: I had hoped to induce you to remain, in a manner, the mistress of this house, till she should have acquired somewhat of your staid self-possession. Everything has gone on so satisfactorily since—the—the sad event which brought you amongst us—that in my present weak and depressed state I cannot help dreading any change. Do you think I could make no arrangement with your father, which —I should not expect you to act as governess to my little girls; I could engage a young person in that capacity. In fact, my dear Miss Wold, you should be treated as the eldest daughter, and as the mistress of the house. Would not your father consent to spare you for a time?"

Isabel's tell-tale face had been flushing, but she answered demurely—"I am honoured by your good opinion of my capacity? but I am too young, and in other respects quite unfit for so responsible a situation."

"If *I* do not consider you so, Miss Wold ——"

"It is impossible that I should remain absent from my father longer, Mr. Blanchard. Even if I had no other reason for refusing your offer, that would be a sufficient one."

"I fancy that I could reconcile Mr. Wold to a year or two's separation," Mr. Blanchard said: he was incredulous of Isabel's resolution to decline a position of such dignity. "You would enjoy so many advantages—the superiority of any connection you might form while under my roof ——"

Here Mr. Blanchard paused, and again he moved restlessly under the influence of Isabel's evil eye.

"I thank you once more for the kindness of your intentions, though I think you overrate the value of the advantages you offer—I do not mean to form any connection out of my own rank of life. I am sure my father will agree with me about my unfitness for the position you wish me to fill. Do you like that Clara should accompany me to Wrangham Farm? I have not proposed it to her; but I believe she will be willing to do so if you have no objection."

It took Mr. Blanchard some moments to master Isabel's refusal and her offer. Then he answered—"I—hem! Clara certainly seems to want change—I am obliged to you, Miss Wold. I can see no objection to Miss Blanchard's remaining a short time at your country retreat. Of course, in her deep mourning, she will not go into society."

"I have no society into which to introduce her; we shall be always alone and quiet."

"Then I shall feel really indebted to you if you will have my daughter with you for a short time."

Mr. Blanchard rose from his chair and was about to leave the room, but Isabel recalled him.

"Mr. Blanchard!" There was some archness in the pride of her aspect. "You remember of whom our family consists—my brother is unmarried, and lives at home."

Mr. Blanchard took in the meaning of Isabel's speech slowly, then said—

"Ah! the young man who accompanied your father here once—I remember—a sensible, well-conducted young man. His being at home, married or unmarried, can make no possible difference to Miss Blanchard! Still I thank you for your plain dealing." Saying this with his loftiest beneficence, Mr. Blanchard moved off.

"I could punish you for that contempt of my Richard," Isabel thought, looking after him. "It could only bring sorrow—there shall be no falling in love; I will prevent it!" She decided.

She thought a little prudent management would avert all danger of that at this time, when Clara had her thoughts

so fully and sadly occupied; and as she looked at Clara, entering the room just then with the dejected air now habitual to her, her thin, white face contrasting strongly with her black dress, she believed that she would not be so bewitching to a man's fancy as the sparkling, blushing, bright-winged beauty of happier days—though she knew her to be far dearer to her own heart.

"Your father lets you go home with me, Clara; we must go the day after to-morrow," Isabel said.

"Oh, Isa! I am very glad! When I come back I will do all I can in every way to thank him." The girl answered tearfully.

"Now, dear, you must see Mrs. Farr, and tell her your wishes with regard to the nursemaid and children, lay down rules, and I am sure that Mrs. Farr will see them observed."

Isabel's hand was on the bell. It was on the eve of departure that she said this to Clara.

"Wait! and tell me first what to tell her," Clara pleaded, characteristically.

At parting, Mr. Blanchard presented Isabel with a set ol books from his library. She received them with a feeling of relief, that no costly offering had been made as an acknowledgment of her services.

CHAPTER XX.

WRANGHAM FARM.

IT seemed like a strange dream to Isabel to find herself, one August evening, pouring out tea under the fine old walnut-tree at Wrangham Farm.

The dusky-red gold of level sunbeams lay drowsily upon the prettily-furnished tea-table which had been prepared for the two travellers. Those sunbeams drew quaint, sharp leaf-patterns upon the grey western wall of the many-gabled old house, then, sloping down a smooth grass-plot, broke into bright flame upon a bed of scarlet geraniums in its centre. Wrangham Farm had formerly been known as the Manor House, and it boasted grounds and gardens of a considerable extent. Some parts were overgrown and desolate-looking ; but the pleasaunce, which the party under the walnut-tree overlooked, was well-ordered, laid out in beds, borders, and lawns. Beyond, stretching far away towards the sinking sun and the low, blue hills, lay luxuriant pastures, among which wound the broad river, here catching and mirroring the light of the sky, there disappearing awhile among shadows of trees growing upon its banks. A quietly beautiful prospect it was, especially at this hour, on such an evening.

Isabel had her father on one side, Clara on the other. Richard stood at the table, hospitably intent upon carving a fowl. Wolf had subsided, after many demonstrations of delight, and lay at his mistress's feet.

"I feel as if I had taken up my rest here for the remainder of my life," Mr. Wold said, with a sigh of deep content, turning from the fair landscape to Isabel's glad and lovely face.

"It is delicious after our dusty journey," Clara remarked.

"Has Mr. Long been seen or heard of at Burton Lacey?" Richard asked, by-and-by.

"No," was all Isabel's answer.

"We have not seen anything of him for so long a time that I think he must be abroad again," Mr. Wold explained.

"I do not know why you should suppose that. Mr. Long has repaid hospitality by hospitality—there the matter ends. I do not suppose that you will see much more of him."

"We were treated with more than conventional hospitality while we were at Moor Hall, Isabel," her father said, reprovingly.

"Generous people like to give more than they have received before they consider an obligation discharged, I suppose," Isabel answered, her colour heightening because Clara's eyes were trying to read her face, and Richard looked at her curiously.

After tea Isabel and Clara stood together in the flowery porch awhile, just to inhale the scent of honeysuckle, clematis, and jasmine, and to watch a little moon, which lay on the verge of the crimson sky, set behind a far-off wood.

"Do you remember the evening we watched the moon rise from the garden terrace, Isabel? Little we thought how it would be only a year later. Everything so changed!"

"I remember. It is just a year ago!" Isabel made up for few words by the fervour of the kiss she pressed on the forehead, where the twilight seemed to linger lovingly. Then she took her friend to her room, and busied herself with thoughtful arrangements for her comfort.

"Remember that you are a disguised princess now, Clara, lodged like a simple country girl. This room is small, but the habitable end of Wrangham Farm does not afford a better."

"It is very pretty."

"Yes, I think it is. I like these casements when they are thrown wide open, framed with leaves, as this is."

"Isabel, I have never asked you all about Moor Hall. It must have been so odd to stay there. Just sit down here and tell me all about it. And I want very much to know how you like Mr. Long."

"Dear, you forget! I must go to papa and Richard; it is so long since I have seen them. Can I do anything for you first? I am your lady's maid, you know."

"Oh, I can wait on myself. Only come in just for a moment when you are going to bed."

"I will. Now good-night. I hope I shall see you asleep when I come. You are here to grow strong, you know."

Isabel found no one indoors when she went down. She

went to the bench beneath the walnut-tree, and could just see that her father was still sitting where she had left him. She touched him gently on the shoulder, asking of what he was thinking.

"Of old times, my child," was his reply. "Old grief, joy, love, anger. How old they seem—so far off—so dim!"

"Don't talk like such a very old man, papa!"

"I am going fast down hill, Isabel!"

"Won't you come in, now? You have been here so long, and there is a heavy dew falling. Where is Richard?"

"I saw him go towards the orchard. Here he comes, and Wolf after him. Wolf won't wander away, now you are come home, perhaps."

"Richard, we must have some music to-night," Isabel said hastily. "I am thirsty for music. I have not once opened the piano at Burton Lacey: I didn't like to do so."

"Will not our playing disturb Miss Blanchard? She looked shockingly tired."

"She will not hear it in her room." Isabel led the way to the house.

"Papa," she said, coming to him a few moments afterwards, loaded with some musty volumes, "this is a valuable work I received as a present from Mr. Blanchard. Perhaps it will interest you. He must have thought me very blue, I am afraid, to give me these as an appropriate gift." And with a comic grimace, and a scrutinising look at her delicate fingers, lest they should have been soiled, she left her volumes before her father and went to the piano.

"You and Mr. Blanchard are on amiable terms?" Richard said.

"He treats me most respectfully. Did I tell you that he wished me to assume the position of mistress of his house—to act as a sort of duenna to Clara—do I look very old, papa?" she asked, turning to him.

"Certainly not, when you put off the 'staid and dignified demeanour' of which worthy Mr. Blanchard speaks with so much approbation. You can be a merry, saucy child enough."

"Isabel favours us by often appearing in a new character, 'for one occasion only.'"

"Now attention, Richard! let us play this long-neglected symphony with proper —— No, wait; I want to know first, have you heard from Leigh lately?"

"Yes. He is getting on splendidly—at least, I can pick

out thus much from the little which modesty allows him to write about himself; but he complains bitterly of your long silence. He begs leave, by-the-bye, to dedicate his first important composition to you."

"Which I shall deny."

"Why?"

"I don't wish my name to be on the title-page of endless pieces of music."

"You ought to feel honoured. It may be handed to posterity in that manner."

"Ought I? I do not, however."

"This is Isabel in her proper person, proud as ——"

"No more talking. Begin, if you please."

"That was a favourite of Mr. Long's, was it not?" Mr. Wold asked, when the last breathings of one of Beethoven's exquisite adagios had floated away, and the musicians paused to congratulate each other that the old favourite was so well remembered.

"Yes, I believe he liked it," said Isabel, carelessly.

"And anything else you played, I fancy."

"Richard, I beg you will make no remark of that kind."

Richard smiled, and bowed his head in mock humility.

Isabel discovered next day that the cottage where "Mary" lived was plainly visible from some of the windows at Wrangham. She often looked towards it, and wondered about its mysterious inhabitants.

CHAPTER XXI.

ISABEL'S PLANS UPSET.

ISABEL was conscientious. She was wise enough never to say in words, either to Richard or to Clara, "Come, I won't allow any nonsense, or falling in love, between you two," but her conduct expressed that very useful prohibition. She acted the part of a most strict duenna, warding off Richard's respectful attentions and sympathising homage, and keeping Clara as much as possible out of his way, with the greatest skill. But Isabel found it tiresome to have to be so prudent.

Fortunately the autumn evenings were soon too short and chill for country rambles, or lingerings in the garden, therefore her task was easier after Richard's return from business than it might otherwise have been.

The weeks became months, and Clara did not talk of going home. Isabel could not propose to send her, and believed that there was no reason for wishing to do so. Mr. Blanchard was pleased with the reports his daughter gave him of how well Isabel made her occupy her time, and of how strong and cheerful she was getting, and in his return epistles always sent courteous messages to his "charming young friend and her father." He had never made a companion of his daughter, so did not much miss her.

Mr. Wold did not mean to leave Wrangham Farm till winter should set in; indeed, he seemed to feel some doubt if he would leave it at all.

The weather continued fine and pleasant far into October.

"I should like to go and see Miss Erlridge this afternoon," Isabel said, as she and Clara stood sunning themselves in the porch one afternoon. "What will you do while I'm gone?"

"Oh, I have to write to papa, to prepare my German to read with you, to practise, and plenty of things. Indeed, I shall not be dull."

"Then I will start at once, or I cannot get home before dark."

A few moments after, Clara watched her friend winding down the lane, walking thoughtfully over the dead leaves lying thick in her path: musing of course of nothing particular, and not so deeply but that she had eyes for the beauty of the autumn hedges, gay in bright leaves and berries, fired by the orange-hued sunshine.

Her visit to Miss Erlridge was, as usual, rather a long one. It was somewhat late when she left the Square, and she thought she would go to the shop to ascertain if her father or brother were ready to accompany her home.

But as she walked down Castle Street she saw Reginald Long enter her father's door, so she turned back and took her solitary way home.

She was clear of the town, and was crossing the river-side meadows, when she heard some one behind call Wolf, and Wolf bounded back at the call. A moment after, Mr. Long overtook her.

If he had been disagreeably, painfully occupied during these many months—and her father said that he had been so —a glance at his face assured Isabel that he was not unhappy now. It was a radiant face, and beamed down prodigal gladness upon her. But she did not choose to meet him just as if this were the to-morrow of that last day at Moor Hall; she did not choose to let him take up their friendship just where he had been pleased to leave it. He felt the coldness of her manner keenly.

"I returned home from abroad only yesterday," he said. "I was detained there for months, and am very glad to be a free man again."

"My brother imagined that you were from home."

"He might have been sure of it, I think, seeing nothing of me for so long. And when did you return from Burton Lacey?"

"About two months since; Miss Blanchard returned with me, and is staying at Wrangham Farm."

"Indeed!" Mr. Long looked much surprised—a fact that did not escape Isabel. "Yours must have been a painful visit, Miss Wold. You do not look as well as when I saw you last."

"Of course it was painful—deeply painful—Mrs. Blanchard was a woman who could not fail to be missed."

"And you are very young, and, I should hope, inexperienced in sorrow. Was there no relative of the family there?"

"The Blanchards have no relatives."

They soon crossed the dewy meadows, and reached the sheltered lane. Isabel half paused when they came to a path branching off in the direction of the cottage, expecting that Mr. Long would take that road.

"Do not go out of your way under the idea of my needing protection," she said, looking up at Mr. Long; "Wolf is an all-sufficient companion."

"But I was going to the farm, if you have no objection. Your father expects to find me there on his return," he added, with a half smile, "so I am not going out of my way."

Isabel's eyes fell, and she was angry to feel that she blushed.

"Your father told me that Richard had gone home with the idea of getting a companion for a walk this beautiful afternoon. He did not know you were out, I suppose."

"No."

Isabel looked somewhat uneasy, and hastened yet more. It almost seemed as if Mr. Long read her thoughts. His next remark was,—

"I suppose Clara Blanchard has grown into a woman now! It is a long time since I last saw her—is she pretty?"

"Very—and very sweet-looking: perfectly lovely sometimes."

"And your brother Richard is so handsome and so winning, with his frank, cheery ways—I wonder Mr. Blanchard trusts his daughter down here so long!" Mr. Long spoke with a half inquisitive playfulness.

"Mr. Blanchard thinks that Miss Blanchard, of Burton Lacey cannot possibly run any risk of losing her heart to a tradesman!" proud Isabel answered slowly.

"He is a pompous old gentleman, begging his pardon. Your brother is as true a gentleman as any Blanchard ever was! If Clara is worthy of him, I should feel inclined to turn matchmaker."

"I do not feel at all inclined to do so. My brother is a gentleman; but that would make no difference to Mr. Blanchard, and ——"

Isabel did not finish her sentence: just then they came in sight of the walnut tree; on the bench beneath it, at the greatest possible distance from each other certainly, sat Richard and Clara—her book lay on her knee—she was listening with an expression of unwonted animation to what he was saying.

They both looked somewhat confused, when Mr. Long and Isabel joined them.

But Mr. Long at once put Clara at ease by the manner in which he entered into conversation with her. Isabel suggested that it was too cold for sitting still; so they all walked about the garden a little while. When Mr. Wold came home, they went in to tea.

Mr. Long stayed late. It was like one of the old evenings in Castle Street, only different, in a way that Isabel felt intensely, and would not acknowledge to herself.

As she bade Clara good-night—very affectionately, for she had been rather stern to her when she came home—Clara, kissing her, whispered—

"Isabel, I am *so* glad! I have always liked him—this is best of all, that he should like you so well."

Isabel freed herself, looked at Clara coldly, said—"You are mistaken.—Even if you were right it would not matter, I shall never marry out of my station—But you are quite mistaken"—and went from the room directly.

When Isabel had put out her candle, she drew up the blind and looked towards Rose Cottage. She saw a light still glimmering there. Mr. Long had said that he was staying for a few days with friends in the neighbourhood. Why did he make such a mystery of his connection with that fair young girl? It was not right—not right, nor wise, nor good! so Isabel said to herself, indignantly and passionately.

Next morning Mr. Long appeared at their early breakfast table. Wolf had followed him home the night before, and he came to bring him back: he smiled at himself as he made this excuse; and Clara smiled triumphantly at Isabel, who felt both smiles, though she seemed conscious of neither.

"When do you return to Moor Hall?" Mr. Long was asked.

"I do not exactly know," was his absent answer, "Richard, can you play truant from business cares this morning, and let us join the ladies in the walk? It is such a beautiful morning for walking, Miss Wold!"

"Yes—but Clara is no great pedestrian; and I think it would be better if you gentlemen went independently of us if you wish to go far."

"I rebel against that summary dismissal!" Richard exclaimed. The result of which rebellion was that Mr. Wold walked alone into town; and the four young people set out on a long ramble.

Before they came home again, Isabel was the merry self she had been at Moor Hall ; save that she was cumbered by cares over Richard and Clara, who, picking blackberries, red dog-wood berries, hips, and clusters of silvery-seeded wild clematis, to make a bouquet with scarlet and orange maple leaves, lingered much behind, and often had to be waited for. Mr. Blanchard! Mr. Blanchard! what horror would have thrilled through your thin, but blue-blooded veins, could you have seen the hosier's son thus devoted to the service of your daughter, bending over her hand, arranging her berry-bouquet, and, as he did so, daring to think that her lips and cheeks, now the latter were brightened by the sunny crispness of the autumn morning, were hardly less bright-hued.

On Mr. Long's head must fall much blame. Spite of difficulties which Isabel threw in the way, this was not the only such dangerous, delightful walk taken by those four young people. Everybody, even Mr. Wold, seemed to combine to defeat Isabel's prudent measures. By-and-by even Isabel forgot pride and prudence—forgot to try and understand Mr. Long's conduct and her own heart—floated sunny-eyed down the stream of the Present—and let the sunniness hinder her from looking towards the Future.

CHAPTER XXII

CHECKED.

ISABEL and Clara had just settled to their morning occupations. The bright weather was over; it was a Novemberish November-day—late in that month.

Isabel sat by the fire at a little writing-table, and had begun a long-promised letter to Leigh. Clara had gone into the next room, by Isabel's advice, to have "a good practice." Clara was not now loath to take pains to play well; and Richard as well as her sister, appeared anxious for her improvement.

Isabel, having written—"Dear Leigh," leant back in her chair thoughtfully. Minutes sped without her heeding. She had mused for half-an-hour, when Mr. Long entered unannounced, Wolf at his heels.

"He followed me again last night; he is a sad truant," Mr. Long remarked apologetically.

Isabel stooped to pat the dog, scolding and caressing him together.

"Wolf, you have lived with me a year, and have not forgotten former friends yet—still love them best," she said, reproachfully.

Wolf licked her hand, and settled himself at her feet.

"It is exactly a year," Mr. Long observed, looking at the two with an unmistakeable expression in his eyes, as he stood just opposite. "You have on the same kind of dress you had that morning. Now you have a cluster of golden chrysanthemums in your brooch;—how lovely they look on the violet—then you had them in a little vase by you, which you told me afterwards Wolf broke!"

"Wicked Wolf!" She suddenly looked up from the dog's face to Mr. Long's and said, "What a wonderful memory you have, Mr. Long!"

"Yes, for some things—for things I love; and I love—a violet-coloured dress!" But he looked, rather, at violet-coloured eyes.

"I wonder if he can look more loving when he looks as 'Mary'? Well, it *is* pleasant to have such a friend! We will show that it is possible for a man and woman to form and hold friendship!"

So thought Isabel, glancing only at the surface of things, perhaps unconscious that she dared not look deeper. She leant back in her chair with a sigh of idle content.

Mr. Long sat down, and gazed into the fire with a grave, even anxious, face.

"I am obliged to go back to Moor Hall to-morrow," he said, after a silence of considerable length.

Isabel's heart gave its first awakening throb. She was angrily conscious of the colour dying her cheeks as she answered—

"Are you? I am sorry;—we shall all miss you."

"Shall *you?*"

"Of course we shall."

"Miss Wold—Isabel! do you remember an attempt I made in the spring to—I was about to give you an explanation when ——"

"When I told you that your explanation was quite unnecessary!" Isabel spoke hastily, her whole manner completely changed. There was a throbbing of brain and heart that confused her—she hardly knew what she said.

"Excuse me; but now it is more than ever necessary that I should enter upon that explanation. I owe it to you and to myself—pray let me speak. I should so regret any misunderstanding—regret! what a word!—Indeed, I *must* speak plainly to you now. There is much in my conduct that demands explanation—much that if I did not hope you believed in me as I—I—in you.—In short, unless you will hear me, it is impossible but that you should misjudge ——"

"Again I repeat that your explanation is not needed—is uncalled for—would be unwelcome!"

Isabel rose in great haughtiness, and stood leaning one hand heavily upon the table. "We have been friends, Mr. Long; I did not believe that you could think—that you were capable of—of putting any mistaken construction on my words and actions. I did not think you would presume upon my position—I am very sorry that I thought of you too highly."

"Miss Wold! only wait before you misjudge me—listen! let me plead my excuse; why will you misunderstand me!"

Mr. Long followed her on her indignant retreat—even tried to take her hand to detain her; but she went away—would not even look at him again.

He sat down in his former place, leant his head upon his hand, and waited, trying to think—to understand! He could now hear each note struck by the unconscious Clara in the next room;—mechanically he followed her through her carefully-played exercises. Clara was in a diligent humour; she practised those exercises for a whole hour; and during that time, Reginald Long sat still and waited.

When a servant entered, to replenish the fire, he started up, and walked to the window. She asked, should she tell Miss Wold he was here? He said—

"No, I can wait!"

Then he resumed his seat.

At last Clara came in. She opened her eyes wide, and enquired for Isabel.

"Would you ask her if she could speak to me, one moment?" Mr. Long spoke, with averted face, and a voice that strove to be careless.

"Certainly! I hope you have not been waiting long," Clara answered, and sped up-stairs.

In a few moments she re-entered slowly—came up to Mr. Long, and said, with sorrowful reluctance—

"Isabel cannot come down, she says, Mr. Long. She says that you have nothing to say which she desires to hear. She told me I was to repeat those words."

"Then I will wait no longer!"

Mr. Long rose; as he did so, he first noticed the "Dear Leigh," which Isabel had written.

"Is anything the matter? Are you ill, Mr. Long?"

Clara looked up at him with pained, wondering eyes.

"I am not ill; but everything is the matter, child." So saying, he hurriedly left the house.

Clara gazed after him; then went up-stairs to Isabel's room.

"Is he gone?" Isabel asked.

"Yes."

"Then let us go down-stairs; I must go on with my letter."

"Isabel, let me speak just this once, may I?"

"Say on, child."

"Isabel, I am sure that Mr. Long loves you,—that he wanted to tell you so. He is so grieved—so hurt. How

could you send such an unkind message? If you had only seen his face!"

"Clara, you are a little goose! and you are quite mistaken. I have reason to know that Mr. Long is engaged, if not even married. He wished to tell me this, lest I should fall in love with him, forsooth! I would not allow him to insult me by his explanation. That is all!"

"I will never believe that Reginald Long loves any woman better than he loves you, or will marry any woman but you, unless he tells me so himself. I am *sure*, quite sure, that he wants you for his wife." Clara spoke very emphatically. "If you would but have listened!"

"You are a silly child! Because you love me, you fancy that everyone else must do so. But I know better. It is well it is not as you fancy; for long ago I made up my mind not to marry out of my own station,—that is, not to marry at all! I am very sorry to lose Mr. Long as a friend; but you see it is well that he does not really like me in the way you fancy. Now come down-stairs; it is cold up here; say no more on this subject, and do not waste your sympathy on imaginary sufferings, dear!"

"Imaginary! You couldn't say that if you had seen Mr. Long's face. Some day we shall know who was right, Isabel!" said the obstinate little Clara.

While kneeling before the fire to warm herself, — she seemed thoroughly chilled by that hour in a fireless room, and yet it was not so very cold,—Isabel said—

"Clara, are you going to write home, to-day?"

"Yes, and I know what you are thinking—that I ought to *go* home."

"Your papa is certainly very patient; I do not want to spare you, I needn't say that, I hope; but the little ones and the house must want you. I think, dear, you ought to go home; your papa would be pleased if you proposed to return, instead of waiting for his summons."

One tear after another fell into Clara's lap; Isabel thought it best not to notice them; besides, she was not in one of her most sympathising moods.

But when Clara went away, and returning with her desk, and with very red eyes, said,—"I will tell papa that I am quite well now, and ready to come home whenever he likes,"—Isabel rose up and kissed her lovingly, calling her "a good, brave child."

Both the girls were very dull and subdued the rest of the

day. Isabel's occasional flashes of liveliness fell dead, Clara was so pre-occupied.

Their dullness was infectious. Mr. Wold's face wore an anxious look all that evening. He gazed often and long at Isabel, apparently seeking the reason of something he did not understand. Richard make no comment when he heard what Clara had written home to say, but he did not seem much more cheerful than the others.

Isabel was detained by her father as she was bidding him good-night: he held her hand firmly and looked in her face searchingly.

"Has Mr. Long been here to-day?" he asked.

"Yes, papa." She returned his gaze steadily.

"Did you vex him, Isabel?"

"He vexed me, papa," she replied, her colour heightening.

"You were angry, inconsiderate. Hasty and unjust."

"I was angry; I had a right to be. Let me go, papa. This ring is hurting my hand."

He let go her hand and turned from her, sighing. So they parted for the night, and Isabel was haunted by that sigh.

She stood before her glass, looking into her own excited eyes, and muttered, "If this were true—this, that they all fancy—if—he—loved—*me?*"

She shook her head and set her lips firmly.

She could not sleep that night. It was with her as if a sense of great unapplied power had awakened suddenly. Was it power of doing—suffering—hating or *loving?* Some day such power must assert itself wildly. How? Isabel, you should tremble with fear, instead of with mere vague excitement.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HE LOVED ME!"

WRANGHAM FARM was deserted. Sodden leaves lay thick under the bare walnut. The spot on the lawn that had been so brilliant with scarlet blossoms, was covered with yellow foliage.

Isabel, approaching slowly up the lane, on a gloomy winter day, paused to look at the closed-up house, the desolate garden.

She had not even Wolf for a companion; spite of the cold and fog, she seemed bent on a long walk, for she went up the lane, across the soaked fields, towards the cottage of mystery. Pausing, when she was near it, she called and whistled to her dog; he had strayed away the day before, for the first time since Reginald Long had returned to Moor Hall.

No Wolf answered her call, and she went up to the paling to call again. Still no Wolf; but a face appeared at the window opening on the verandah.

A minute after "Mary" came down the path, with a shawl thrown over her head.

"You must come in and rest," she said; "your dog is safe. I am sorry he is so naughty."

She opened the gate and waited for Isabel to enter.

"Thank you, but I must return home; if you will be so good as to send the dog to me I shall be obliged."

"Indeed you must come in, mamma wants so much to see you. I was going to send the dog back this afternoon, but now I am glad I did not. Do come in and warm yourself."

Isabel found herself yielding; perhaps partly from curiosity.

"I am afraid you thought me very inhospitable last time you were here; but we had such strict orders from Reginald not to receive *any* visitor, and Reginald is a person who

must be obeyed. I told him yours was a face to be trusted, and he said, 'Yes, but not one to be clouded with such ——'" She paused, sighed,—and looked very much like Reginald Long. Perhaps because the same troubles had weighed upon them both. Then she added, more gaily, "But things are brighter now, we are not to be such strict prisoners. Wolf won't trouble you by running away any more, for we are going to leave this neighbourhood."

Isabel was ushered into a tiny but exquisitely pretty room, where sat the shadowy lady, habited in black. But Wolf, too, was there, lying by the fire, and greeted Isabel so boisterously, that she was troubled to approach to take the thin hand extended to her.

She was greatly perplexed, too. Why should they greet her so gladly? What was she to them? Passive from wonder, she was made to sit down and have her damp shawl and bonnet removed by Mary's hands.

"It was so kind of you to come yourself instead of sending for your dog; I used to be afraid of Wolf, but he seems quite gentle now." The pale lady perused Isabel's face; but her gaze wandered off and sought about the room in a frightened way, when she met the girl's eyes. "When I called Mary so hastily, the day that you were here before, I had no idea to whom she was speaking, and Reginald had charged us so strictly to avoid strangers—and indeed I knew how necessary it was to do so." The lady sighed heavily.

"Is Miss Wold at all like my description of her, mamma?" Mary asked, as if to change the subject of her mother's thoughts.

"Yes, my dear, you almost did her justice; pray excuse our unceremoniousness, Miss Wold, but we cannot feel strange towards any friend of our Reginald's. He has explained to you why there was an appearance of mystery in our seclusion. I know he has long desired to do so; but, dear fellow, he is—Mary do you not hear a man's step outside?"

Such a wondering scared look came over the lady's face as she paused and listened.

"No, no, mamma dear," was answered, soothingly. Mary sat on a low stool at her mother's feet, dividing her attention between the fire and Isabel's flashing, changeful face. "I wonder," she said, soberly, "shall we be as happy as we have been, spite of all, at this cottage?"

"This cottage is very pretty; its situation is beautiful!" Isabel remarked, feeling obliged to speak, out of her dream.

"Yes! but it is very lonely; in the winter nights I am afraid," the mother said.

"Only one more night here, mamma! only one?" Mary replied, patting the thin hand with her fingers caressingly.

"You leave to-morrow, then?" Isabel asked.

"Yes—Reginald fetches us to-morrow—so we shall not lure Wolf away from his allegiance to his rightful sovereign any more."

"Reginald told us that your friends call you 'Queen Isabel' sometimes," the elder lady remarked, smiling admiration at her visitor.

"Reginald said, too, how fit a title it seemed!" said Mary. "You can make even Reginald afraid of you sometimes."

Isabel's eyes sought for the third finger of Mary's left hand—it wore no ring; Isabel passed her hand over her brow—would she not wake presently?

"You are tired! Your head aches with your long walk. You must have some tea." Mary rose as she spoke.

"No, indeed I must go home."

"You must not yet. We will have tea in directly. Mamma likes it very early, and our gardener and his wife shall walk home with you afterwards. 'If only it were to-morrow, Reginald would be here to do it."

"But my father will be uneasy." Isabel hesitated. All her usual proud decision had vanished.

"Only for an hour or two: and you will satisfy him that you have been in good company. You kept profound silence as to your former meeting with us. So kind of you!"

"How do you know?"

"Things come round. We find out everything about 'Isabel,' may I call you so? don't we, mamma?"

"Reginald does, certainly. *You* won't think us foolishly fond of our Reginald, my dear; others might."

"I certainly have a great respect for Mr. Long—as far as I ——" Isabel paused and coloured violently.

"I thought ——" Mary began, then paused, looking both disconcerted and disappointed. "Mamma! we have not seen Reginald since—not for a long time," she reminded her mother.

"No, we have not seen him since—so, perhaps—" she, too, seemed disconcerted, and her tone to Isabel grew cold and formal. "I fear you may think us impertinent and intrusive," she said. Then all three of the party looked into the fire, and awkward silence fell. The rattling of cups and saucers was a welcome sound.

Isabel rose now, and said—

"Indeed, I had rather go home at once, before it gets dark."

"Yes; the roads are in a very bad state; perhaps it is wise of Miss Wold to take advantage of the daylight," Mary's mamma said stiffly.

Mary assisted to shawl her guest, looking concerned and full of wonder.

"We must and shall meet again soon," she said, as Isabel offered her hand in leave-taking. "Oh, Miss Wold, forgive me; but don't grieve our Reginald!" she whispered.

"Mary," her mother said, in a proud, warning tone, "Reginald Long should not need any to plead for him."

"But, mamma, only we know half his goodness, and half what he has suffered for us."

Isabel, calling her dog, hurriedly took her leave.

Oh, the beating heart, the burning cheek, the rapid, uneven step that went through the dreary fields and lanes! "What did they mean? Who were they? What could they mean?"

The mother and daughter sat by the fire, and the twilight had fallen.

The mother shook her head. "That is a proud girl, Mary. All is not right."

"All must be right, dear mamma, in time. She cannot help loving our Reginald."

"I wish Reginald were here. I do not like these long winter nights; I am afraid *he* may come. If he should—oh, Mary, if he should come to-night!"

Mary's cheek turned pale—her eyes followed her mother's restless, searching look; but she answered quietly—

"You are not so well to-day, mamma, dear; to-morrow Reginald will come and take us home."

"Isabel, you are out too late, love," Mr. Wold said, meeting his daughter just outside the town. "I have been anxious, and this air is bad for you, even though you keep that thick veil over your face. Where have you been?"

"To look for Wolf, papa."

"At what a pace you are walking! You have found Wolf, I see. Was he at his usual haunt?"

"Yes."

"At the Cottage?"

"What Cottage?"

"Oh, I share the secret; you need not be afraid. Has the mother any appearance of being insane?"

"Insane?"

"Yes. Her husband tried to prove her to be so, you know."

"She has an unsettled, frightened look in her eyes."

"Poor thing! A sad life she has led. And that young girl; she is most to be pitied, perhaps: her suffering began early—she was young when her mother married that wretch."

Isabel again put her hand to her head. Every one conspired to talk riddles.

"I don't clearly comprehend," she said.

"It *is* complicated. Mrs. Long was a widow when she married Reginald Long's father. Her daughter's name is Leigh—Mary Leigh; she is going to be married to a friend of Mr. Long's. Mrs. Long was obliged to leave her husband, who ill-treated her, and Reginald has befriended her and her daughter. It has been necessary to keep their place of refuge secret—but you know all this, of course. Here we are. Go up-stairs at once, and change your clothes, Isabel; I am sure they are all damp."

"And I would not hear his explanation," said Isabel to herself in her own room. "How rude, how proud I was! And—he—loves—me. But what matter? It was best so—only—if I had but been more gentle! But what matter? He so kind, so noble, so loving! And I would not hear him; I reproached him, I wounded him! Oh, Reginald! Reginald! Yet, any way, I must have pained him. And he loved me! Yet best so; he will love me no longer *now*."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

MISS ERLRIDGE was going to spend the latter part of her Christmas holidays with friends living in the country. Isabel went with her to the station, and waited to see her off.

It was early in the morning, and the weather was so severe that few persons were travelling. The usually bustling station seemed deserted. Isabel and Miss Erlridge, warming themselves by the fire in the inner waiting-room, thought there was no one else expecting that train, till they heard voices in the outer room, then caught great part of a conversation carried on there — the first few words of which attracted their attention.

"So you are going down to Moor Hall shortly, Waynton?"

"I am."

"I suppose you know Long well?"

"As well as any man, perhaps; you remember that, after my marriage I shall be, in a manner, connected with him: Miss Leigh is his father's stepdaughter."

"True. I understand that Long's conduct to the unfortunate lady, his stepmother, has been admirable."

"Most admirable. Reginald is a noble fellow."

"A truly noble fellow; but singular in some of his opinions, is he not? I suppose there is no truth in a report that is being circulated in Caiston, to the effect that he is about to make a low marriage—to marry the daughter of a shopkeeper of this place."

Miss Erlridge was on the point of rising, but Isabel laid her hand heavily upon her wrist, signing her to remain quiet. They heard Mr. Waynton's answer.

"To the best of my knowledge, Long is not about to marry at all. He, with his fastidious taste and highly cultivated intellect, is the last man in the world likely to form a mésalliance, fortunately."

"But I hear that the young person is beautiful, accomplished, and, to all appearance, quite the lady. Of the latter assertion I am incredulous. The middle classes are very well in their way; but ——"

"I know your opinions. Long does not share them. If the lady is all you have heard, her social position would not alarm him. What sort of man is the father?"

"From what I can glean, I fancy that he must be singularly intelligent and well-informed—a man of good natural abilities and considerable culture; but still he is a shopkeeper, you know. We must draw the line somewhere. The middle class should keep to their places. I do not see what right the man had to educate his girl so highly that Long could think of dreaming of her as an equal."

"Long says that each man should keep his place—any place his abilities enables him to gain. He considers that the time is now come when the truth that society is constituted of individuals, not classes, may be recognised."

"Poor Long! I fear that much trouble has made him mad. As I said, we must draw a line somewhere. By-the-bye, this train is late—snowed up, perhaps."

"I do not see the necessity. Reginald says, draw no lines —confound all distinctions! Let education—the great leveller—remove all social barriers, produce sympathy of tastes between diverse conditions of men, so as gradually to lead on and up towards the state of Christian brotherhood, which ——"

"Madness! I trust, Waynton, that you do not mean to adopt Long's opinions."

"Why not? What fool's talk—what arrogant talk it is! —about 'drawing lines,' and 'the middle classes keeping their places!' I defy you or any man to say where this class begins, that ends. Then, think of our calling ourselves brethren in one faith, and yet drawing our hands back, as we do, from receiving the grasp of brotherhood from any we choose to count as inferiors. The religion of this age is very hollow—society is very false. Long is one of our few true men. Who was it that expressed wonder where some ancient aristocrats must go after death? saying that the 'society' in heaven would certainly not be 'select' enough?"

"Bitten, I declare! Now, would you like to marry a shopkeeper's daughter? Ah, I perceive you shrink. Spite of your talk, it would go against the grain to call a man behind a counter your father-in-law—confess!"

"Well, you see I am a nondescript—no true man, like Long. I am 'a born aristocrat, bred radical.' To be honest, I hope that this report about Long may prove to be unfounded. Let the lady be what she may in herself, such a marriage, just now especially, would mar Long's prospects—damage even his usefulness. He can't afford such a step—any step that would, however unjustly, lower his social position—cause him to lose caste. But I think there is little doubt that this report emanated from the Darrall faction, and *is* quite unfounded. I shall see Long in an hour or so; I'll mention the matter to him. The train at last!"

"Do not make use of my name. Now pray, my good fellow, don't let Long infect you with his folly—instead, do what you can to sober him. I think you are sound at heart still. You winced from the thought of a father-in-law behind the counter."

The train was puffing away inside the station now. Miss Erlridge and Isabel came out of the inner room.

Isabel's cheek was flushed, her eyes and mouth were intensely scornful. Instead of hurrying nervously through the room, as Miss Erlridge did, Isabel passed through it slowly; she swept by the two gentlemen close, her dress brushing against them, giving them a haughty side-glance as she did so.

"What a beautiful girl!" Mr. Waynton remarked, as he and his friend left the fire for the platform.

"How proud-looking! I hope, Waynton, they did not hear our conversation. I thought we had the station to ourselves. She looked as if we had given her offence."

"I thought so, too. I wonder who she is. She ——"

"Good-bye. Remember me to Long."

Miss Erlridge and the last speaker got into the same carriage; for Isabel had insisted on Miss Erlridge's travelling first-class—the weather being so severe.

When the train was gone, it happened that Isabel and the gentleman she had heard called Waynton, having watched it out of sight, turned towards each other. Their eyes met: he looked at her, as he held the heavy door open for her to pass out, with an expression of half-confused deprecation.

Isabel bowed very slightly, pulled her thick veil down over her face, and went direct home. She half thought that he guessed who she was. She saw he was a gentleman, and therefore would be pained at the idea of having given pain. Yet she was not inclined to spare him—she would

have found satisfaction in saying, "I am the shopkeeper's daughter of whom you have spoken!"

He paused a little that he might not seem to follow her—but his way lay in the same direction; as she went into the house she saw him coming down the street.

Bitter, painful pride was in her heart. She wanted to forget what she had heard; so when she had removed her furs and wrappings, she tried to apply herself to her studies in her own beautiful room—meant to be a haven from worldly vexations and annoyances. Why should her thoughts continually return to the words she had heard exchanged between these gentlemen—they were gentlemen, she knew.

"This is hard—but what matter? It only confirms what I knew before. Surely my resolution did not need to be strengthened: this can make no difference."

Those words uttered aloud, she applied herself diligently to her books. But every little thing could distract her: any trifling noise made her start—the slanting-in of the winter sunlight disturbed her. She watched its creeping on and on, till it touched one book after another lying before her.

There was a rap at the street-door, and some one came up the stairs and into the next room.

"Mr. Long wishes to see you, Ma'am," the servant announced.

Isabel shut one book after another, as if she knew that she should not want them when he was gone. She rose, and advanced to meet him.

He placed a chair for her, and she sat down. He did not attempt to begin an ordinary conversation, but said:—

"You must excuse plainness. I am hurried and anxious. I want all misunderstandings put an end to. Once you ask me had I ever put my energy into anything? I said that I should some day, I knew. Do you remember?"

Isabel bowed.

"That is long ago, and ever since then the whole energy of my nature has been put into one thing ——"

Isabel looked at him so gravely, so coldly, so enquiringly, that he paused and hesitated.

"Last time we met, I had the misfortune to annoy you. Isabel, teach me how to avoid doing so again. Some things, of which I tried to speak, have since then explained themselves — I — It is of no use. Look at me less coldly, I entreat; for, Isabel, the one thing I have done, with the force of my nature, is to love you; the one thing, I have

endeavoured to win you. I now ask you to overlook much in my position—to take me for my love. My past conduct needs explanation, I may have seemed forgetful, negligent, at one time. Isabel, do not stop me as you did before : let me justify myself in your eyes."

She was rising. Those same words on her lips, only spoken very gently.

"I still say that your explanations are uncalled for. I do not desire them. I thank you for the honour you have done me," she spoke soberly, not mockingly. "But nothing you have done requires explanation, for nothing has placed you in an unworthy light. Once I did you wrong, and I ask your pardon; but we can only be friends. I ask your pardon for any wrong I did you, for any pain I give you now —but we can be only friends."

She had risen and stood erect, speaking slowly and mechanically; there was no shade of red on cheek or lip.

He stood and looked at her.

"I cannot but believe that you speak in earnest. Coquetry —everything uncandid is far from your character. I could wish you less noble and more loving."

He spoke with the quietness of despair.

Isabel answered, "I thank you that you do me the justice of believing me. I am confirmed in my first impression of your character—you are truly a gentleman—you have done me great honour." Strange words at such a time. "Again I ask you to forgive me what pain I inflict."

Still he lingered.

"I would not have for pity, what I cannot gain for love," he said, "or I should tell you how every calm word of yours tortures me. I should tell you how long I have loved you —at times how hopelessly, despairing of being able to offer you a worthy position. But now ——"

She put her hand out to lean against something. Moisture came to her eyes, colour to her white face.

"Isabel! Isabel! say but 'I love you.' Oh, love me!"

He came towards her and spoke passionately; he even knelt before her.

There she stood with drooped lids, she dared not meet his eyes; there he knelt and looked up at her. *That* was like the courtship of days of old. A wild struggle raged in Isabel's breast. She knew that to yield was but to speak three truest words and be most blessed for life. "He cannot afford to mar his prospects, to lower his position and

lose caste by marrying beneath him." Pride could disguise itself as purest love.

"Mr. Long, you pain me. It is vain. I will never marry you. You will not say more."

"Your words are absolute, and shut out hope."

He spoke bitterly, and rose to go; he had not even touched her hand in leave-taking He went towards the door. She did not feel that she could bear this—to part so.

"Do not pain our Reginald," a soft voice seemed to whisper in her ear. Isabel stretched her hand after him.

He did not see the eager gesture of recall.

"Mr. Long, at least, we are friends," she said with difficulty.

He turned.

"Not now; we must be everything or nothing to each other. Possibly in time."

He went; she did not hear anything after the shutting of the door for a long time. Not that she fainted; when she was roused by a noise on the stairs, she was still standing where he had left her. She had been absorbed, had seen her future life—sunless, desolate, dragging on year after year, into a palpable gloom and obscurity. She knew she must have stood motionless a long time, for her limbs seemed stiff and powerless, and the room was dim when the servant came in to lay the cloth for dinner.

She felt it difficult all that evening to prevent herself from falling into such a trancelike state.

No one mentioned Reginald Long or seemed to know of his having been at Caiston; Isabel kept her own counsel.

Dreamy as she had been all the evening, when she went to bed she could not sleep. She reversed that afternoon's decision in her mind, lived the life that would have followed yielding, then passionately reproved herself for weakness: so the night wore away.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONFLICTS.

A MARCH wind was blowing about the wreaths of passion vine which garlanded the window of the drawing-room in the quiet Square, where Isabel, her bonnet off, and hair drooping down over very pale cheeks, sat talking to Miss Erlridge.

"Yes, I wish you would give up your immoderate walks, Isabel."

"It isn't very long since you wished me to give up studying immoderately, and to go more into the open air."

"I don't want you to do anything immoderately: at present you are wearing yourself out."

"Oh, no, Wolf and I enjoy our rambles; we only rust out when we do all things in moderation."

"I don't like the look of you, child, or your way of talking; neither are cheerful or natural. You want change; you lead a much too solitary life."

"Change I am about to have, for I have promised to go to Burton Lacey. Clara has been ill again."

"I am glad you are going away from home."

"Do you imagine it will do me good? It will not."

"You don't know. Any change will do you good—by-the-bye, Isabel, have you heard anything, or seen anything of Mr. Long, lately?"

Isabel had no confidante. Miss Erlridge tried to ask the question carelessly: but succeeded too indifferently to deceive Isabel, whose tone was haughty as she answered,

"No, not for a long while; I did not expect to do so."

"Was it not strange that Wolf's old mistress should have been an old pupil of mine? I should like you to have the opportunity of becoming well known to each other—you and Mary Leigh. I hear she has grown into such a very sweet girl, poor thing! hers has been the education of adversity."

"We are not likely to meet again."

"I do not know; strange things happen."

"How that wind does blow. I must go out;" Isabel started up, and began tying on her bonnet.

"This is my half-holiday, and I will go with you, if a moderate walk at a moderate pace will content you."

While Miss Erlridge got ready, Isabel sat down to the piano, tossing her bonnet off again. She smiled to herself bitterly, as she remembered how, through that half-open folding door, she had heard Mrs. Ravey's comments on her being admitted to this school. "One day it will be my turn! One day I will make this power of mine felt in some way," she muttered, then began to play a strange strain, putting her excited thoughts into her music, bringing rich tones out of the much-used keys.

The servant came in to look for Miss Erlridge. Some one wanted her, she said; but Isabel did not heed.

The folding-doors opened a little wider, and a gentleman came through—Reginald Long.

Isabel stopped playing.

"I beg your pardon! I came only to see Miss Erlridge," Mr. Long said, bowing gravely: he had a much depressed air.

"Will you sit down? Miss Erlridge will be here almost immediately," Isabel answered in his own tone.

She left the piano and seated herself in a dim corner of the dim room: he took a chair by the table.

"It is a thorough March day," he observed.

"Yes! the wind is very boisterous," she replied.

He then turned over the books on the table; she played an imaginary air with her fingers on her knee.

There was silence till Miss Erlridge entered.

"I am the bearer of this packet to you from Miss Leigh," Mr. Long said to Miss Erlridge. "She wished that I should deliver it in person. I believe it is a farewell gift: she is to be married to-morrow." Mr. Long smiled his most melancholy smile.

"Indeed! I wish her all possible happiness. Is it not sooner than she expected?"

"Yes, there are reasons, concealed from her, which have made it advisable that she should at once have a home of her own. Mr. Waynton was most anxious to hurry on the marriage, and I may not long be able to offer her and her mother my house as their home."

"You will miss Mary very much."

"Yes—very much! I will not detain you. I see you are going out. Can I take any message to Mary?"

"I will certainly write; but wish her from me all possible happiness."

"A wish everyone who has the privilege of knowing her will echo. Good morning, Miss Erlridge. Good morning, Miss Wold."

Mr. Long took his leave. Miss Erlridge followed him to the door; when she returned, Isabel was standing by the table.

"Isabel! Isabel! what does this mean?" Miss Erlridge asked, almost sternly.

"What does what mean?"

"Mr. Long's manner to you—his deep depression. Child! child! you have been playing with your own happiness, or sacrificing it to your pride."

"Do not expect me to account for a man's caprices," Isabel said coldly. Who would have thought that she had touched the books he had touched, for the mere pleasure of placing her fingers where his had been, during Miss Erlridge's momentary absence.

They went out of the house.

"Take my arm, Isabel! I will help you home," Miss Erlridge said, when she saw on what manner of face the daylight fell.

"I will go home; but I can walk very well without help," Isabel replied, trying to laugh.

"Shall I come in with you?" Miss Erlridge asked, when they reached Isabel's home after a silent walk.

"No thank you; I know you have plenty to do," Isabel answered, added a careless "good-bye," and went in.

Poor Miss Erlridge turned home with a sore, sad heart.

Isabel mounted to her bed-room. There, as was her custom when excited, she spoke to the figure mirrored in her glass.

"What has happened to you that you sicken and shake? Did you think yourself still loved? What matter? to what end? None. Must you love, you great empty heart. Love then! waste, spend yourself in vain loving—What hinders? Only prey upon yourself alone, and do not turn this face too pale, wear it too thin, for no one must know, for no one shall know."

Then Isabel dashed water roughly into her face, made a careful toilet, and went down to dinner.

Her father and brother, standing in the window waiting for her, were talking of Mr. Long.

"It is strange how undeserved misfortune seems to pursue some men," Mr. Wold observed.

"He did not enter into any explanation, I suppose?" asked Richard.

"None—for the reasons, as I imagine, that the only explanation he could give would be an account of his father's weakness and wickedness, extravagance and profligacy—Mr. Long is not likely to speak of such things."

"Indeed no! But how mysteriously and swiftly his prospects have altered;—a few months since, he was full of hope—he spoke as if all those clouds had passed, and his life looked very bright before him! I remember that I envied him," said Richard, soberly.

"I do not pretend to know much of his affairs; but I believe he had entered into some arrangement with his father; that the old man had bound himself, on his honour, to give up play and live abroad quietly. Long trusted that—but I know nothing certain! it's a miserable story—I am as sorry for Reginald Long as I could be for you, Richard."

Mr. Wold turned at a slight noise: Isabel had entered and taken her place at the table in silence.

"He was thoroughly attached to Moor Hall! to part with it will grieve him dreadfully!" Richard remarked.

From this and other allusions Isabel learnt all her father knew, while she remained silent and apparently self-engrossed.

At dusk Isabel sat idle, by the fire, alone. She had been out again; her familiar had driven her out, kept her out in the wild March weather; now, though she had returned drenched and exhausted, the familiar was not laid. Isabel was suffering from a new feeling, near akin to regret. Reginald Long, landless, friendless, in trouble! This was not the Reginald Long whom she had refused! Could she have known! Could she but have foreseen! Then—Poor proud Isabel!

She sat alone by the fireside and thought of what might have been! If now she had the right to be Reginald Long's comforter? If she were his betrothed—soon to be his wife, to share his troubles, to stand to him instead of houses, lands, friends, far dearer than all. Every gentle look of his, gentle, but richly fraught with assurance that she was dearly

loved, came back to her, to show her what she might now have been to him! How, spite of all, she could have made his life look bright. Then she thought of the altered looks that had met her that day, and remembered that it was care and sorrow that had changed him.

Isabel was generous; no such thoughts were very bitter. But Isabel was also proud.

"I could not know this! I acted right! I have nothing to regret." Thus she tried to console herself. And through all her pain for him glimmered a faint, vague hope, that, one day, she might be able to compensate for all. "I can wait," she said aloud, folding her hands calmly.

But Isabel's philosophy did not avail her much through a sleepless night. A restless day followed, during which she strove not to believe that she felt ill, miserable, weary.

Again she sat alone, by the fire, at dusk, to go over the same thoughts. This was not to be endured. She rose up hastily—was she becoming a mere love-sick, dreaming girl?

That she would never be?

She left the fire and went to the piano. It had not been opened for two days. Now she roused all its slumbering powers—seemingly striving to drown her thoughts in a flood of harmony, or destroy them in a tumultuous storm of sound.

But presently the keys only gave out a soft wail.

She heard a little noise in the other room, and, looking up, saw Richard standing before the fire, looking into it with a grave and sad face. Then her heart smote her, as she remembered of what he was most likely thinking.

He called her when she stopped playing, and she went to him sorrowfully.

He did not immediately speak: he put his arm round her and went on with his fire-gazing. His first words, when they came, confirmed her fears.

"Isabel, when are you going to Burton Lacey?"

She disengaged herself and sat down with an impatient sigh.

"To-morrow, unless I hear this evening that she is better."

"Do you think that—do not scoff at me, but answer sincerely—that Miss Blanchard likes—could *love* me, Isabel?"

Richard's face flushed as he said those words—Isabel's as she heard them.

"She is just a loving child who could love anybody. But my brother must not ask for what he would be insultingly refused! Richard, you must forget her! You must rouse yourself. You shall not expose yourself to scorn and contempt."

"She was so grieved at leaving the Farm—I saw her in tears many times, and—Isabel, does she love me?" Richard asked again, pursuing his own thoughts, paying little heed to his sister's passionate words.

"Women do not betray each other's secret—women do not give love unasked! What can it matter if she does like you? Her father——"

"Does she love me, Isabel?"

"She may fancy you, Richard, but she is only a child; her first love will not be her last. Richard! brother! you must not, you shall not set your heart upon her."

"You speak too late. My heart is set upon her," Richard answered slowly.

"I wish she had never come to Wrangham Farm."

"That would have made no difference. I loved her before then."

"Richard, it will only make you unhappy, this love. My brother must not expose himself to insult and——"

"I must love her."

Another silence, then he said, in a cheerful, manly tone,—

"I have made up my mind not to let pride interfere with my chance of happiness. I will lose nothing for want of asking;—my plan as a boy, you know; which answered uncommonly well."

"But you do not know Mr. Blanchard—he is as stubborn as he is weak—you will not be able to make any impression upon him—it is like beating water. You will see his prejudices come into their old places, obliterate all marks of your attacks upon them. Richard, do not have anything to do with him; give her up. Oh, try and forget her. It will be so hard to have my brother treated with contempt—scornfully rejected. She is not worth *this.*"

"I shall do nothing that will lower me in the eyes of my friends or of the All-seeing. What matter for the opinion of others? Isabel, you are too proud—too proud. I have been been silent; let me speak now. Sister, are you not sacrificing your happiness to your pride? Have you not refused the very best thing life could offer you, for the sake of your poor, piti-

ful pride? Forgive me if I speak plainly. I would see you less proud. You will grow ungentle—unwomanly. Throwing away your own happiness, you will wreck his, ours, also. Is it too late, Isabel?"

Isabel kept silence a moment, then said, haughtily,—

"We were talking of your affairs, not of mine. You are not proud enough, Richard."

"My love for my sister makes her affairs mine," Richard answered, gently; "and if I could only see you happy, I would not care what manner of life mine is to be. The longest life and the saddest soon passes, and is as a tale that is told. One can but suffer so much—life much."

"I shall be able to bear my own burdens," Isabel said, with a dreary dreaminess.

"—God strengthening you. I do not ask you to do what you can for me. I know you will, as far as pride does not interfere. I shall go with you to-morrow to Burton Lacey."

"To-morrow! What is the use? Clara is ill!"

"The more reason why—if—you told me she was not keeping her room."

"No; but oh, Richard, I can't bear the thought! I know how you will be treated."

"I shall talk to my father to-night. You may as well go to bed early! you look as if you needed rest."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ACCIDENT.

"CLARA, I think you have been shamming," Isabel said, the first morning after her arrival at Burton Lacey; "you look bright and rosy. Indeed, I shall be angry and very cross to you if you do not learn to do without me."

But even as she spoke, Clara's varying cheek turned white, then red again, with a suddenness that told of anything but robust health.

"Indeed, Miss Wold, she has been very ill, and me and master was most uneasy about her," Mrs. Farr said. "Mr. Greville came home for a few days a week or two since, and was quite unhappy at the change he saw in her. He wasn't able to stay, but he's been writing that master should have advice for her, and look after her, in every letter."

"That will do, Mrs. Farr. I'm going to be well now Isabel is come! only not well enough to spare her for a long time," Clara said, hastily, as Richard entered the room. He and his sister had arrived late the night before, so Burton Lacey had been compelled to extend its hospitality to Isabel's brother.

Isabel was clamorously welcomed by Rose and Ellen, who came in just then. They were great girls now: Rose especially looked too heavy a weight for Isabel's slight figure. Both the children grew quiet when Mr. Blanchard appeared.

"I am much delighted to welcome Miss Wold to Burton Lacey again," Mr. Blanchard said, with his own suave pompous manner. "Miss Wold, Mrs. Ratford," introducing Isabel to a small, insignificant-looking person, who entered just then. Mrs. Ratford was governess to Rose and Ellen. "Mr. Wold, pray be seated—excuse my opening my letters, but I expect news concerning some rather important business."

Mr. Blanchard read his letters. Mrs. Ratford poured out

the coffee. Clara and Isabel took their seats at the breakfast-table, silently, both very busy with their own thoughts. Richard was entertained by Miss Rose, who showed every disposition to begin a flirtation, and had already given him a flower, which he had fastened into his button-hole.

"Very unfortunate; but I find that I must go to Swanton to-day," Mr. Blanchard remarked, as he folded up his letters. "I regret that this business does not take me in the other direction, Mr. Wold; had it done so, I should have had pleasure in offering you a seat in my carriage. Clara, may I trouble you to ring the bell? I must order the horses to be put in at once."

"Is Swanton a long way off?" asked Isabel, wondering when Mr. Blanchard would return.

"Yes! it will be late to night before I shall be able to return. I regret that I shall be obliged to behave so inhospitably as to run away on your first arival, Miss Wold! But your brother, as a man of business, knows that business must be attended to."

Richard bowed and Isabel coloured.

"Dear me! Clara! I remember that Sir Wilton Watkins was to come to-day to ride with us over to Lord Orford's estate."

"It is of no consequence, is it, papa? Any other day would do?"

"It is always disagreeable to be obliged to break an engagement and show anything like a want of proper respect and consideration. But you and Miss Wold must do your best to entertain Sir Wilton. You had better ride in some other direction—Miss Wold is, I remember, a very excellent horseman. Horse exercise is prescribed for Clara, Miss Wold."

Mr. Blanchard having delivered himself of a few other speeches, hurried over his breakfast and took his leave. Of Richard he took leave, in a manner that showed that he did not expect him to remain longer at Burton Lacey; but Richard did not intend to depart till he had been granted a private interview with his host.

"Does your brother like riding?" Clara asked, as she and Isabel sat in the drawing-room.

"Very much."

"Then he can ride Percy's horse. Percy hardly ever comes home now; he says it's so dreadfully dull, so it will be a good thing for his horse to be exercised. Ah! here comes that de-

testable little Sir Wilton. Isabel! I hate him—and—he comes here almost every day, and papa makes so much of him."

This was in a hurried whisper. Isabel's "Ah!" revealed that she comprehended more than she was told.

Richard entered the room a moment or two before Sir Wilton, and had seated himself, and taken up a book from off the table.

Sir Wilton, having greeted Clara and Isabel, stared wildly at Richard, who looked quite at home in that drawing-room.

"My brother, Sir Wilton," Isabel said. "I believe you have seen him before."

"Oh! ah! very happy—had quite forgotten," the astonished little man drawled. "So your papa's off—not able to ride with us to-day, Clara," he continued, throwing himself upon the sofa beside her, and making a great show of ease and familiarity. "Where shall we go then, as we can't go to Lord Orford's?"

"Wherever Isabel likes," Clara answered, very stiffly.

"Aw! you are fond of riding, I suppose, Miss Wold. By-the-bye, most unfortunate affair! What a dreadful smash this is for Long. I conclude you know all about it, Miss Wold." And the snaky eyes fastened on Isabel. "Moor Hall going to be sold, and no one can tell why. There's something at the bottom of the mystery Long chooses to keep up. Can't be the father in fault this time, for some one said he was dead. Oh! but then, by-the-bye, some one else said he had threatened to come to England, claim his wife—that crazy woman, and live at Moor Hall with his son. The crazy woman is put quietly out of the way somewhere. Waynton has married the daughter, and taken her and her mother off. Unheard of generosity! only think of having a mad mother-in-law when a sane one can drive a fellow out of his wits sometimes. I presume Moor Hall is to be sold, that old Long may not find a home there—dutiful that, isn't it? And some people, who should know, say that the son isn't much better than the father, spite of his assumed saintship."

"Then some people say what is utterly false," Richard replied hotly. "Reginald Long is a true-hearted gentleman."

"I will never believe anything bad of Reginald Long," Clara said. "I am sure he is very good and very nice."

"He certainly stands far above the reach of such vague calumnies as these," Isabel remarked, calmly.

"Well! he is fortunate in having warm champions," sneered Sir Wilton. "But, aw! you haven't told me where we shall ride, Clara."

"Isabel, where would you and Mr. Wold like to go?" Clara asked, in a dignified tone.

"Over the downs. Come! we will get ready. I should like a canter over the downs," Isabel said.

The two ladies left the room. Sir Wilton whistled and whipped his boots. Richard took up a book.

"Isn't he a detestable little creature? When he calls me Clara, I long to—to kill him, I think," Clara whispered to Isabel as they went up-stairs.

"He *is* a thoroughly detestable, mean-spirited creature," Isabel answered with slow emphasis. "Do not be afraid of him, child; show him that you hate him."

"But papa!"

"Mr. Blanchard will never wish you to like a man who is not honourable, even according to his notions. My father can tell him facts concerning Sir Wilton, that will show him in a true light. Do not be afraid of Sir Wilton, Clara, I will protect you from him."

"I will try not to be: but I dread him as I should a snake."

"We will not ride far, for I see you are not strong," Isabel said, feeling how the girl trembled with excitement, and noticing how she changed from white to red with almost every breath she drew.

"It will do me good, with you, and on such a delicious day! April is my favourite month, and this is true April weather—such blue sky, white clouds, breezes, and sunshine:" Clara spoke cheerfully.

They were soon mounted and off.

Clara really was not strong, she had been ailing and fretting so long. Isabel and Richard were content to ride slowly for her sake.

But when they came on the open down, Sir Wilton laid his hand on Clara's rein, and said—

"Now for a gallop over the turf!"

"Miss Blanchard is rather tired, I think," Richard ventured to remark.

Isabel was a little in front, and wrapped in her own thoughts, or she would have interfered, for Clara looked frightened and faint already.

"Miss Blanchard can answer for herself, *I* think!" sneered Sir Wilton, and he gave her horse a sharp cut with his cane. Isabel's started off and kept in advance. Roused by the swift motion, she urged it on, and away she flew over the short, elastic turf. The faster she went, the better she liked it; on she went till the edge of the down was reached. Then she drew rein and found that she had far out-stripped her companions. She awaited awhile, gazing at the wide stretch of sea and land spread out before her, and sinking again into the mazes of thought. She did not see, or hear anything of the others; she grew uneasy and went back.

Turning a corner made by a low stone wall bounding the down, she saw Clara lying on the ground, Richard kneeling beside her.

In a moment Isabel had dismounted, and was bending over her friend.

Clara lay quite white and still—she had an ugly jagged cut upon her temple, which had bled profusely—for much of the bright shining hair was wet with blood—and Richard's shirt was stained with the same angry red.

"What has happened? Clara! my darling! Is she dead?"

Isabel knelt by her, and would have raised the fair head upon her breast; but Richard put his arms round the girl.

"*My* darling now!" he said, and held her close.

Isabel got water from a cottage near; she splashed it on the girl's face, and washed the wounded temple.

"How did it happen?" she asked, when she saw life returning. "Did the horse stumble?"

"Sir Wilton made her horse gallop. I suppose she fainted. All at once she dropped her rein, and fell, cutting her forehead against a stone," Richard answered, hoarsely.

"And where is Sir Wilton?"

"Gone to the house for assistance. Isabel, she doesn't stir."

"Let me move her, Richard."

"No! leave her here. Clara, my love! my darling!"

He bent his head down over her face, and muttered many more tender, wild words.

Presently she opened her eyes, and looked up straight into his with a child's look of trust, love, and wonder. Colour came into her face—troubled joy into her eyes. She partly raised her head, then it fell back again, and the eyes reclosed.

Isabel took her from Richard's arms now.

"Are you better, dear? Clara, you have frightened us! Rouse yourself, darling!" she said.

Clara half sat up, leaning against Isabel, and tried to smile.

"How am I to get home, Isabel?"

She put her hand up to the wound Isabel had bandaged with her handkerchief.

"Sir Wilton is gone for assistance."

"It was all his fault!" Clara said; then glanced at Richard, smiled, and flushed softly, as if she felt she could forgive him. Richard could not, for she was suffering.

Mrs. Farr and several of the servants appeared before long. Great was the consternation occasioned by Clara's accident. She was happy enough to feel amused at the way she was carried home, on a mattress, as if in a triumphant procession. But long before she reached the house she lost consciousness again.

Arrived there, Isabel and Mrs. Farr took possession of her; and Richard was left to spend the rest of the lovely day in solitary wanderings and doubly anxious thought. Sir Wilton had disappeared.

Clara grew very feverish towards night; and the doctor, who had been summoned, ordered the most profound quiet.

It was past midnight when Mr. Blanchard returned home. Isabel, leaving Mrs. Farr with Clara, went down to receive him.

"I am sorry you have waited up for me, Miss Wold. You look very much in need of rest. Is Clara gone to bed? Miss Wold, has anything happened?" Mr. Blanchard made a dead pause.

"Clara has met with a slight accident; she fell from her horse, on the turf, fortunately; but she cut her forehead, and is weak from loss of blood. She is slightly feverish, too; and the doctor wishes her kept very quiet."

"How—how did this happen? There must have been something wrong; some one must have been to blame; for my daughter is a most expert horsewoman. Now, who was to blame? I must know."

Mr. Blanchard spoke excitedly.

"Sir Wilton Darrall was very much to blame; his conduct was inconsiderate and ungentlemanly in the extreme. Clara was already tired; she is not strong enough to ride, Mr. Blanchard; Sir Wilton proposed a gallop, and immediately

gave your daughter's horse a stroke with his cane. The horse started off, and Clara fell."

"Sir Wilton struck my daughter's horse without her permission!—Most ungentlemanly!"

"How did Sir Wilton behave after the accident?" Mr. Blanchard demanded next.

"He rode to the house for assistance. I have not heard anything of him since. My brother is still here. He is very anxious about Clara. He also desires to see you alone before he leaves Burton Lacey."

"Your brother anxious about Miss Blanchard!"

"They are well acquainted, as Clara was our guest for three months."

"True! I beg your pardon for detaining you in the hall so long, Miss Wold."

"Shall I tell Mrs. Farr to send you any refreshment?" Isabel asked, struck by Mr. Blanchard's worried, feeble look. "I shall sit up with Clara to-night!"

"Nothing, I thank you. I thank you for your attention to my child. I deeply regret that anything so unpleasant should have happened. Let me know if Clara becomes worse,—if anything is wanted. I suppose I had better not see her to-night."

"Much better not," Isabel answered.

She had matter enough for thought as she sat watching by Clara that night. She had no hope for Richard; and she fretted much at his having placed himself in such a position—an unwelcome guest! a despised suitor! Her cheek flushed angry when she thought of this.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONTRASTS.

CLARA was much better next morning when her father went to see her. She looked very white, but quite composed: and Mr. Blanchard flattered himself that there was no cause whatever for alarm—that she would be as well as usual in a day or two.

Richard received a cold and distant greeting from his host that morning.

Mr. Blanchard, for the first time, considered the young tradesman attentively: his handsome, refined face, and pleasant, winning manner, were commented upon and reckoned against him as faults. He had no right to be what he was!

Richard had not slept, and looked ill and nervous; his appearance made Isabel feel miserable. Spite of his efforts at self-command, his voice trembled audibly when he asked an audience of his formal, pompous host.

Mr. Blanchard conducted him into the library, throned himself in an arm-chair, and desired Richard to be seated opposite him.

Not long after, a request was sent to Isabel that she would go to the library to speak to Mr. Blanchard. She armed herself with all her patience and resolution, tried, for Richard's sake, to forget her pride, and went down.

Mr. Blanchard was alone. His usually pale face was flushed—his light eyes were even more restless than usual.

"You knew the nature of your brother's design in accompanying you here, Miss Wold?" was asked angrily, yet timidly.

"I did, Mr. Blanchard, and I regret it as deeply as you can do, though for very different reasons."

"I am glad that you look at the affair in the proper light," Mr. Blanchard said, more calmly. "I have been astonished at that young man's audacity—astonished, Miss Wold."

"We must understand each other," Isabel haughtily answered. "I mean that I regret that Richard should love your daughter; because I regret that he should expose himself to the pain and annoyance which, I fear, your obstinate prejudices ——"

"Young lady, explain yourself! What may you mean by my obstinate prejudices? I could overlook want of fortune in my daughter's choice—but Miss Blanchard must marry a gentleman!"

"My brother, Mr. Blanchard, is a gentleman—in refinement of mind, gentleness of manner, in intelligence, and in intellectual culture. Far more a gentleman than Sir Wilton Darrall—at least as much a gentleman as your own sons. Your daughter returns his love—they would make each other happy. Richard can offer Clara not a splendid position, but one of ease and comfort. Clara is unfitted to be a great lady—she would be far happier as the wife of a man of middling fortune. Does not your good sense confirm what I have said?"

Mr. Blanchard's eyes fell before Isabel's steady look.

"My daughter is no doubt adapted to the station to which she has been called," he answered pompously.

"She is well adapted for the station to which God calls her—to be the wife of the man she loves, by whom she is beloved."

"I will not believe that Miss Blanchard has so far forgotten herself as to entertain any affection for this presumptuous young man! Nor, Miss Wóld, do I hold you blameless. This attachment was formed while Clara was trusted to your care. You have abused my confidence, my very great confidence—you have made a very ill return for my many acts of kindness."

"Pardon my reminding you, Mr. Blanchard, that you are saying what is untrue. When you told me you should be pleased for Clara to accompany me home, did I not suggest that I had a brother? Did you not understand what that suggestion implied?"

"Ah! hum—if you did, and I believe that you did, and that I replied that that could make no difference to Miss Blanchard, ought not the very confidence I showed in you to have—ahem!—to have prevented you from allowing any possibility of such a disastrous occurrence as the present?"

"The disastrous occurrence to which you refer is the mutual attachment between your daughter and my brother?"

"Yes, of course, at least not mutual. I cannot believe that Clara returns this—this young man's—hem!—affection!"

"Should I be able to convince you that such is the fact—should you, after a time, become convinced of my brother's individual worth—would it be possible to obtain your consent to their marriage? Mr. Blanchard, if ever in your youth you loved, self-forgetfully and deeply, pause before you answer me!"

"Impossible! I could never consent. My daughter marry a—a tradesman! impossible!"

"Richard, in deference to your—prejudice, should seek some other occupation, my father will do anything to secure his happiness. The business might be sold—Richard might have all our property—my father and I would go away—anywhere. It is not only for Richard I plead, but for Clara also. Clara is better, because she is happy—because in the agitation and alarm of yesterday she discovered that she was loved. She is a frail child, and great grief might kill her."

Isabel's eyes were wet, they shone full upon that insincere, uneasy face.

"You put everything in an exaggerated light—a girl's fancies are soon forgotten. Elderly people, who have had experience, see in what false colours all things connected with love and marriage appear to the young. No! my daughter cannot and shall not marry a tradesman. Men in my position have duties which you cannot understand. We owe much to our station—to the feelings of our associates and equals. Even at the expense of our affections we must do our duty. This is a painful business. I am sorry for your brother, who is no doubt a deserving young man; but I do not apprehend but that he will soon—hum!—come to his senses, as it were—recall his misplaced affections, and see my conduct in a just light."

Mr. Blanchard's eyes looked at everything but the eloquent face opposite him. Isabel paused as if praying for patience.

"Do I understand that your objections to this marriage are *all* based upon my brother's connection with trade?"

"Exactly so! As I have said, no doubt he is a deserving young man. I will even own that he appears to have been carefully brought up—that he is gentlemanly ——"

"But you would prefer that your daughter should marry an undeserving man, a weak, mean, wicked man—whose hands are contaminated with every vice—but trade!"

"You speak under excitement—violently. I trust that nothing in my conduct justifies your having formed such an opinion of my character."

"Your conduct does justify me in my opinion, Mr. Blanchard—your encouraging Sir Wilton Watkins Darrall to seek the society of your innocent daughter. He is mean, weak, wicked, utterly undeserving any pure woman's love—most thoroughly deserving every just man's hate." Isabel spoke passionately.

"Your opinion of him has been formed upon the misrepresentations of his enemies. I do not deny that in his youth he was somewhat wild, but I have reason to believe that he is now ——"

"A complete hypocrite. I judge him as those judge him who are acquainted with the facts of his life."

"Should I find that your view of his character is a correct one, even in a modified form, I shall of course discourage his attentions to my daughter. Now I do not see that any good can be done by prolonging this interview, painful to both."

"Will you see Clara die rather than let her marry my brother?"

They had both risen. Isabel confronted Mr. Blanchard almost threateningly, making this last appeal, and he quailed.

"I have made no such statement. She will not marry your brother, neither will she die."

"I could almost hope she might, for your punishment and her happiness," cried Isabel vehemently:—

She had lost all patience now.

"We shall never again be supplicants to you, Mr. Blanchard. The time may come when you will be so to us! Till then we do not meet. When you lie on your death-bed, may it prove a great consolation to you to remember that you offered up your child's happiness as a sacrifice to the respectability of your family!—that you may be able to say the Blanchards have never allied themselves with anyone connected with trade."

"I—that is—Miss Wold ——"

Isabel turned at the door, and fixed her eyes of unutterable scorn on his feeble figure.

"You—you do not leave till Clara is—is better?" he asked.

"I and my brother leave your house together. I am no more fit company for your daughter than he is."

Isabel swept away; her heart seemed bursting with indignation, rage, and, worst of all, sense of powerlessness.

Richard was in the breakfast-room; she went to him.

"I shall be ready to go directly! I go home with you!" she said.

"Do not leave her, Isabel, pray! I entreat you stay with her—you ought not to go—you must not!"

"I shall go home with you. I am sorry for her; but I cannot help her. It is best that I should go home with you. I might—I might ill-use that obstinate old man, if I stayed.—Oh, Richard! Richard! I said it would only bring misery. I *will* not stay under the same roof with him—I cannot."

"If I might but bear *all* the misery. But, Isabel, she loves me! That thought maddens me—she loves me!" he repeated.

Isabel stole up to Clara's room. Clara was asleep—smiling in her sleep like a child. Isabel's heart felt almost the mother's agony as she bent over her, and thought—"The storm will break, and she will have no one to fly to."

But pride was stronger even than this grief and love.

Isabel raised herself, and beckoned Mrs. Farr out of the room.

"I am going away, Mrs. Farr," she said.

"Oh, Ma'am, don't! It'll break her heart. Forgive my master if he has angered you; he's but an old man."

"It is impossible that I should stay. I only want to ask you to be very tender with Miss Blanchard. There is great trouble hanging over her; and I shall not be able to help her. Don't tell her too suddenly that I am gone."

Mrs. Farr was in great grief and perplexity; but Isabel left her, joined her brother, and they two quitted the house, walking down to the hotel, from whence Isabel sent for her luggage.

In a narrow lane, Sir Wilton Watkins Darrall dashed past, riding towards Burton Lacey, splashing Isabel plentifully with mud from his horse's hoofs.

A very grim expression had Richard's face as he looked after the unmannerly horseman—the hand on his arm was painfully compressed.

Isabel set her teeth, and muttered—"I hate you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"FAREWELL!"

EARLY summer beauty — hopeful beauty — fresh-blown beauty —was upon the "pleausaunte and beautous" land round Wrangham Farm.

Isabel and Miss Erlridge sat under the walnut tree. Silence had fallen, and lasted a long while.

After earnest gazing out, Isabel's eyes filled with tears; she wiped them impatiently, then took up the work lying neglected on her lap.

And you are going to live here altogether now?" Miss Erlridge said, bringing herself back to things present by a visible effort.

"Yes, we are rich now, you know," Isabel said.

"Are you glad?"

"Oh, yes! and much obliged to old Aunt Danton. It is pleasant to be rich." And Isabel's face kindled brilliantly.

"I suppose it is! I daresay it suits you—you lover of splendour. But, Isabel, love, no more such lavish presents as you have made me; they pain me, dear."

"Your brother still intends emigrating?" was asked, after a pause.

"Yes!" Isabel's eyes were dim again. "This is for him," glancing at her work. "He will go soon. He has money now, and more chance of doing well there. He has been so restless, lately, poor fellow! We cannot beg him to stay. A new life in a new world seems the only chance of happiness for him. We shall feel very lonely, papa and I. I almost fancy we shall follow Richard some day."

"Have you heard anything from Clara? It is worse for her. These things do not trouble men long, Isabel," said Miss Erlridge; "they work them off."

"I have heard nothing of Clara; no doubt, she was forbidden to write; but a day or two since, I had a short note from Mr. Greville Blanchard to say that his sister was better in health, and that she was going abroad accompanied by him

and her father. It is a comfort to know that kind Greville has been with her—poor little Clara!"

"I am very glad that Mr. Blanchard has broken off the intercourse between Sir Wilton and his daughter: I understand that Julia Darrall is engaged to Mr. Ravey's son."

"Yes! The Darralls are not rich—the Raveys are enormously so. So the Darralls can forget that young Ravey's grandfather was quite a low, working man."

"That is the tone I don't like in you, Isabel! Let us leave these people alone. I will ask after a friend. What have you heard about Mr. Engledew lately?"

Isabel's face kindled again.

"Oh, he is getting on wonderfully! He has had a glorious success. The Germans liken his music to Mendelssohn's. He is composing an oratorio, and has sent me some fragments. He is at home among counts and princes, and is made much of."

"I should think he would remain abroad; he has no ties in England."

"I should think he had better remain abroad, but he always speaks of returning. Richard talks of going to see him before he leaves Europe."

"Will you walk part of the way home with me?"

"Yes; neither Wolf nor I have been beyond the garden before to-day. But do come in, and see how nicely the old house is being fitted up."

"I see this is to be Wrangham Manor again—Wrangham Farm no longer."

"We are having the large old drawing-room, with the great window in it, made habitable."

"Ah! Isabel is to live in splendour now. I trust you may know truly happy hours here, my love."

"It seems to me," Isabel said, thoughtfully, "that I *am* more content among beautiful things—ugly things annoy me. I cannot help noticing and disliking them. Yes, I am obliged to Aunt Danton for making us rich."

"Well, dear, again I say, may you be very happy at Wrangham Manor! Now, put on your bonnet quickly, there's a good child. I will wait for you under the walnut-tree."

Isabel was soon ready. She walked all the way home with Miss Erlridge, then called in Castle Street for her father.

"Almost for the last time," Mr. Wold said, as he came out of his shop door; "almost for the last time."

"You are not sorry that that drudgery is over."

"No; for I have many schemes in my head that have been waiting time and opportunity for the carrying out. I shall be a busy man still, God granting me life and health. You found the lanes muddy after last night's rain, I should think. That reminds me: just come round to Robinson's with me to look at a carriage I've thought would suit us."

The carriage was looked at and approved by the fair lady who was to ride in it—then Isabel and her father walked home arm-in-arm, thinking and talking chiefly of Richard.

Isabel had a very quiet summer at Wrangham.

Her life was varied chiefly by the pain of parting with Richard, by the efforts she made to keep her father from feeling his loss drearily, and by the indulgence of love and vague expectation.

Expectation! Was only Isabel Wold to be proud! Was Reginald Long to have no pride? Now that the scale was in a manner turned, and Mr. Long was poor and landless, was he likely again to sue for what had been so unconditionally refused him before?

Truly, women's hearts are utterly unreasoning.

Isabel sometimes said to herself, speaking against her conviction, "I shall soon be forgotten: men have little thought or leisure to spare and spend on an absent love; they love always something near them." But she never said, "He is proud, and will not seek me any more."

She dreamed on. It was a new thing for Isabel to indulge love-dreams—to cherish a passion; so these love-dreams of hers were strangely, infinitely delicious, not faint-hued and feeble as a young girl's, but passionately coloured, sharply defined—those of an imaginative woman, conscious of unclaimed wealth of love and power.

How those dreams were ever to become realities, she never questioned—she threw away the only near and apparent opportunity of making them so, recklessly and unregretfully.

Mary Waynton wrote to Isabel, begging that she would visit them, entreating her to do so at once. Mary's postscript said,—

"My dear brother Reginald is with us at present—only for a short time; he is about to leave England."

"It is impossible, simply impossible, that I should go there, then," commented Isabel.

She accordingly refused Mary Waynton's invitation. Yet breaths of the same vague expectation continued to rustle among the dream-leaves of her life. He would not leave England without seeing her again—then ——

Isabel's studies were neglected now. She passed many long, lonely, lovely summer days, sitting under the walnut-tree, her fingers busy with some bit of that "fancy work" which she had been wont to despise; in the evening she rambled in the near wood, Wolf her only companion.

Mr. Wold was called much from home just now. So what with the drowsiness of waning summer, her quietude in the great house, her dreamy music, thoughts, songs—life was but one sleeping or waking dream.

One evening, when her father had been away from home some days—when nothing had broken in upon her dream, and its colour had grown very vivid, its outlines very clear and fair, Isabel wandered about her garden, picking roses with aimless extravagance, and heaping them up in her arms. It was a sultry evening—she walked slowly and demurely, Wolf following after her. When she had paced round and round the garden a while, she took the field path leading from it to the wood, and went on, and on; gaining the edge of the wood, she sat down upon a felled tree, dropping the roses into her lap. She let her fancy float, with a dark speck of cloud, across a sea of glorious sunset light, and indulged all sorts of strange imaginations. Wolf settled himself at her feet, laying his head upon his paws on the skirt of her white dress.

The murmur of a tiny stream trickling very lazily down towards the river set his mistress's thoughts to music, and soothed him to sleep. The air was warm balm; the moon rose before the sunset had paled, and Isabel dreamed on.

Presently Wolf grew uneasy—he raised his head, moved his ears, rose very unwillingly, and snuffed the air.

"Down, down, foolish dog!" Isabel said softly, and laid her white hand on his head; but she glanced uneasily into the indistinct distance behind her.

Wolf paid no heed to his mistress, but listened eagerly. Isabel fancied she heard a rustling not far off. At that moment Wolf bounded away.

A thrill went through Isabel. She stood up and tried to see into the dusky wood, into which the dog had disappeared. She wrapped the light shawl that she had carried in her hand round her, and leant against a tree, one hand on

her beating heart, expecting —— Wolf's return — nothing more? She listened, but heard nothing till Wolf came bounding back.

"What was it, Wolf!—what was it, dog?" she asked him.

She knelt and peered into his eyes, as eloquent of pleasure as dog's eyes could be. But Isabel could learn nothing more than she already instinctively knew.

"Reginald! Reginald! he loves me still! he lingers about me! I shall see him!" her lightly-parted lips muttered. She took her way home through the dewy meadows and the corn fields ripe unto harvest. Already in her heart she grasped happiness. She troubled herself with no searching from whence this rare thing should come—into what manner of nature she could receive it—what manner of thanks and praise she should return for it. But she expected it confidently and madly.

The next day, the next, and the next she did not go from home, so certain an expectation was upon her!

As she played, on the evening of the fourth day, when hope deferred had smitten her with a sense of sick weariness, the last sunshine shone bright upon her music. On one corner the forms of some jasmine leaves that framed the window were sharply shadowed. All at once the shadow of a whole branch stirred and swung across her page.

Isabel was nervous, perhaps, with her long, solitary dreaming. She started, rose, and heard, or fancied, a low-muttered "Farewell!"

She stood still a few seconds—then, impelled by fear, curiosity, or somewhat else, went out beneath the walnut-tree. She heard the noise of horses' hoofs—sprang up upon the bench, and saw a horseman disappear in a near turn of the leafy lane.

Proud Isabel! she stretched her hands after him, and called on him by name. Then she went in, out of the blinding evening glory, and sat herself down in the darkest room in the house, covering her face from the light.

Did Isabel repent the refusal of kind Mary Waynton's invitation? No! it seemed to her now, as it had done then, a simply impossible thing to accept it—to go one step towards the realisation of her desires. She was a throned queen of beauty, pride, power. All things must come to her—lay themselves down at her feet—wait till it suited her to bend in gracious condescension. Love must approach to, lie before her in patient hope, till it should please her to lift

it to her heart. So Isabel's pride spared her, as yet, all the bitter pain of self-reproach!

Yet there was no more summer-time for Isabel that year. Her father thought her changed when he came home.

"Had anything happened?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, a great deal!" Isabel answered lightly. "Farmer Lane has finished his harvesting—all the corn round has been cut, there is nothing but stubble in the fields—and the leaves are beginning to fall very early this year."

"Has nothing happened here—to you, child, I mean?"

"I have sent away the cook, because she was impertinent and troublesome; and I have formally sanctioned the engagement of the housemaid, and given her leave to see her 'young man' once a week besides Sundays."

"Quite right; but nothing has happened to you?"

"Nothing happens to us—does it, Wolf?" Isabel replied.

"I met with poor Reginald Long the other day," Mr. Wold said, after a pause.

"Did you?"

"Yes; he has been in this neighbourhood. Have you seen him?"

"Yes—no—hardly!"

"Isabel, it doesn't show a good heart in you to speak so carelessly of one who is unfortunate."

Isabel's head drooped.

"Perhaps my heart is not a good one! Do you think it is, Wolf?" She patted the dog's head caressingly, then looked right into her father's eyes, and said—

"I answered you thus because I saw a gentleman ride by one day who might have been Mr. Long, who looked something like Mr. Long."

"There! don't look at me so defiantly. I am not angry—only he is a noble fellow, and a most unfortunate one. He asked me a great many particulars about Richard's situation and prospects. He thinks of settling in America, I fancy. Mind, when we next write to Richard, that we don't forget to mention the possibility of Reginald Long's joining him. It would be a pleasant thing for both if they could make it convenient to enter into a kind of partnership, and live together, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. But isn't it time to go to bed?" Isabel asked, with a very visible yawn. "You must be tired after your journey, papa."

"It is early, my dear; but go, if you feel inclined. What

a cold hand you have, Isabel! yet the evening is very mild. You are not well, my child."

"Oh yes, I am, papa. I was thinking that it was quite time to take to fires—that the evenings were chilly." And with a shiver Isabel kissed her father and went to her room.

"'Twill be weary waiting, weary waiting for long, long years, perhaps! But my time will come at last!" she said, as she lay awake, shivering and looking out into the cold starlight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"WAIT AND TRUST."

MR. WOLD and Miss Erlridge sat in the drawing-room at Wrangham, and talked of Isabel. Summer had almost come again.

"Yes, I am anxious about her," Mr. Wold said. "Look at her now, as the sun shines full on her face—how white and transparent it is! But she is proud and petulant—angry if I ask her if she feels ill."

"Would she like to travel, do you think?" Miss Erlridge asked, "or to go and live abroad, in France or Germany, for a time? Thorough change is what she wants."

"Yes—her life here is very monotonous—not a healthy life for a young person of her disposition, perhaps. Thank you for the suggestion. I shall ask her about this at once. I must do something for her."

Isabel entered with a listless step and an expression of langour and discontent.

"I can hardly see you in this dark room," she said. "The sun is so bright outside."

She shaded her eyes with one hand; in the other she held early roses.

"Isabel, would you like to go abroad?" her father asked her—"to Germany, for instance, to look after Leigh?"

Isabel looked at Miss Erlridge angrily, then said to her father, with a hot colour on her face, "Why do you ask me?"

"We think you want change," Miss Erlridge answered, with quiet stedfastness.

"You are mistaken; I do not want change. I am quite well, and quite content to stay at home." Her eyes dared contradiction.

Soon after, Miss Erlridge rose to go.

"You will let the carriage take you back?" Mr. Wold said.

"Indeed, no! A walk on sucn a day is too rare a thing to be missed."

Isabel followed Miss Erlridge to the gate; there she put the roses into her hand, but said, reprovingly—

"You ought not to have led papa to fancy that I want anything that I have not, Miss Erlridge."

"My dear girl, your father himself is anxious—he has been for a long while. Isabel, you are not dutiful to him; he is almost afraid of his own daughter sometimes."

Isabel raised her head haughtily; but Miss Erlridge's meek gentleness was proof against the girl's pride.

The two looked at each other steadily, leaning one on either side of the gate; Isabel's eyes drooped first.

"Why did not you offer to walk home with me to-day, my love?" Miss Erlridge asked.

"I do not walk so far now: I am out of practice in walking. Wolf has become quite lazy too," Isabel answered lightly. Then the two parted.

To go to Germany; to see Leigh; to try a new kind of life among quite new scenes.

Isabel had at first started from this idea of change with regugnance;—it implied much that she denied.

But the scheme began to make its fascinations felt. Before many weeks had elapsed, she was ardently longing to "flee away" and try "to be at rest."

Her father did not allude to his plan again; she feared that he might have forgotten it—he was so busy—always with some committee or meeting to attend.

Could Isabel bring herself to ask him to take her, or to let her go abroad?

"When you spoke of my going abroad, papa," she said, one day, "did you think of going too?"

"Most certainly! I should like to travel a little before I am too old to enjoy new scenes."

"Then suppose we go!"

"You would like it.—When?"

"Oh, soon," she answered, eagerly.

"Engledew will be delighted to hear of our plan," Mr. Wold said, thoughtfully.

Within a week, Isabel and Leigh were strolling together "unter den Linden." Then Mr. Wold and Isabel travelled leisurely about for several months. They passed the coldest part of the winter in the south of France.

After that they settled for a time in Leigh Engledew's

neighbourhood. The proud and beautiful young English-woman became well known in the little court where Leigh was a favourite.

It was concluded that she was "noble;" and Leigh, when asked that question, replied, with wilful simplicity, in an energetic affirmative.

So she was admitted to the Court clique, and might have reigned as a queen of that dull and most respectable society. But Isabel did not wish to lead a gay life—it did not suit her father. She satisfied her soul—or strove to do so—with music; was again Leigh's diligent pupil. And she indulged in deep draughts of German mysticism, philosophy, and poetry, availing herself of a very rare library opened to her through Leigh.

These months of travel and of foreign association were looked back upon by Isabel as the happiest, most mentally-quiet period of her earlier life. She was so much admired—done so much homage to, that she was in a fair way of growing humble, and did become, for the time, very gentle and amiable. Her home grievances were left behind, and for this while forgotten.

Leigh had become manly and grave-looking. Isabel no longer felt her own superiority of age and wisdom in their intercourse. Instead, she deferred to Leigh. He was a grand person in this little German circle: he felt the dignity of his position in a quiet way, and made others feel it just enough. Yet he took alarm one day when Mr. Wold told him something of the sort,—laughingly called him a grand Seigneur.

"You do not think that I am being spoiled?" Leigh asked, anxiously.

"I told you that you were dignified—I did not say proud ——" Mr. Wold answered.

"Even if you were proud," said Isabel, "I should like you none the worse. You have won for yourself a position of which you have a right to be proud."

"A right to be proud!—There is no such right, Isabel, depend upon it! A musician—an artist of any kind—is the last person who should even dream of such a right. The higher the sense in which he is an artist, the deeper the feeling he will have of personal nothingness—of being a mere human receptacle for divine gifts—a mere machine for manifesting divine beauty. At least," added young Leigh, humbly, "so it seems to me; and if I thought that I was in

danger of forgetting this—of being puffed up, and taking glory to myself not my due—I would ——"

"What?" asked Mr. Wold.

"Mortify myself in the sternest way in my power that did not involve unlealty to conferred trust."

"I think, Leigh, that you take a low, humiliating view of human nature! But I know we always used to differ;" said Isabel.

"What is human nature? It is nothing self-existing. It seems to me that humanity rises to its highest perfection by ceasing to regard itself, by becoming, as nearly as may be, a mere manifestation of the divine."

Leigh spoke lowly and reverently, and then began playing a sacred air from his own oratorio, for which Isabel had asked.

"Leigh is changed!" Isabel said to her father.

"Leigh has progressed, say, rather. I do not see anything in him now that I have not hoped and believed I saw the promise of, years ago."

"At least, I feel he does me good," Isabel added, half to herself.

Yet even Leigh raised the demon Pride sometimes.

"I expected only to see you again as Mrs. Long," Leigh said, laughingly, one day when Isabel was in an unusually gay and gracious mood; but he never again ventured such an allusion, to call out the "beautiful fiend" look, which his German associates had discovered in Isabel.

Mr. Wold and Isabel had been abroad a year and a-half, when they returned home.

It was nearly three years since Isabel had refused Reginald Long. Time to forget—but Isabel did not forget.

She returned to her home full of life and of intellectual vigour—a girl no longer—a beautiful, talented, accomplished woman. Yet almost as far from being an ideal woman—a perfect woman—a Christian woman, as many of the poor, abandoned creatures from contact with whom she had shrunk so sensitively in foreign streets.

"They sin from want of principle to control passion," said Miss Erlridge, when she and Isabel were having a quiet fire-side talk.

"Want of proper pride and self-respect, Miss Erlridge."

"Pride will not avail anything against passion, my child; it is a very weak staff to lean upon; it will snap the first time it is absolutely relied upon. Self-respect, alas! where are they to learn that?"

"A proper pride would be proof against passion," said Isabel, following her own thoughts.

"I entreat you, Isabel, as you value happiness, not to trust to even proper pride. Child! seek higher motives—pray for wisdom higher than your own."

"I cannot say that I value happiness, because I do not know what it is."

"Your time will come—Wait and trust."

"Wait for what?—trust in what?"

"Wait for any good gift God may send you; trust that He will send you such."

Isabel drooped her head, and looked into the fire.

"But I am right," she resumed; "self-respect is a kind of pride, and self-respect would prevent self-degradation."

Miss Erlridge sighed as she rose to go home.

"I wish you could give up that tiresome school and come and live always with us," Isabel said.

A little pink flush tinged Miss Erlridge's face as she answered—

"It is not tiresome. I like to work while I may. I begin to feel that the remainder of my life will be very short for all I desire to do in it."

"That must be a pleasant feeling."

"I think it would be a bitter one if we might not believe that only what we can do we are to do—if we might not hope that others will finish our work—and that we shall find better ready for our doing in the place to which we are called."

"You don't feel ill, Miss Erlridge?" Isabel asked anxiously.

"No, my dear," Miss Erlridge answered, smiling; "only old."

"Of all the world, next to my father, I think I could least spare you, though sometimes you have reason to think I don't love you!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CLARA'S LETTER.

ISABEL had a wondrous good memory. Her year was full of mental anniversaries.

"Three years—just three years since you refused Reginald Long!" she said, as she stood before a brilliant fire one gloomy January afternoon, and looked into her own face, mirrored in the glass above. She watched the play of the flickering firelight upon that beautiful face very gravely.

"It is a girl's face no longer—you are getting elderly, Isabel! But you are not ill to look at yet. If he were to come, to see you—you need not fear! You have power, too, of a kind the mere girl had not." A shade of pensiveness softened the brilliant face as she breathed out—

"When? ah, when!"

She turned from the glass, and surveyed the room. It was all a-glow with ruddy firelight. This was the dusk hour, the idle hour, the hour when friends and lovers draw nearest, clustering round the hearth.

Isabel was alone. She walked up and down the room, now and then pausing to bend over her flowers and inhale long breaths of their fragrance.

Wrangham Manor House boasted greenhouses and conservatories now, so that Isabel, even in the winter, could have her vases full of lovely flowers. The air of the room was somewhat overladen with the rich scent of the daphne, which she had plucked fresh that morning.

Isabel, pacing up and down, folded her little white hands upon her breast; the violet velvet that covered it was soft and warm; but Isabel shivered.

She went into the many-paned, great window, and looked out.

"The sickly sun had gone down all white—
Worn and wan with vain essay
To gladden that dismal day—
Yet on snow-clad ground there lingered light."

Isabel, standing there, compared the aspect of things outside with the warm, glowing, perfumed atmosphere within.

Then she muttered to herself fragments of verses written in her "young and foolish" days.

Isabel did not write verses now. Pain, passion, love, which this woman might feel in her future, would be too sharp, fierce, real to be sported with in verse, as the girl had sported with what she then thought earnest things.

Yet she had some tenderness for the lines that now came back upon her memory imperfectly—some tenderness, though she smiled mockingly.

"Firelight flickers on the walls,
  Reddening gold of picture-frames;
Brightly on fair flowers it falls,
  On my books' gold-lettered names;
Plays on back of carvèd chair,
  And on crimson cushion's swell,
On the purple dress I wear,
  Till that might for crimson tell.

"Against the window drive hail and snow;
  And the great white sun behind the hill
Went down, it seemeth, long time ago.
  All without looks so ghastly and chill!
Sleet freezes into an icy hem
  Round the poor rose on my balcony,
But just deprived of its last red gem.
  Oh! it is cold by that lone fir-tree!

"Am I so warm by this lone fireside,
  Firelight flickering on crimson and gold—
With no need to heed aught may betide
  Out in the wind, and the snow, and cold?
Does the rosy warmth bring rosy glow
  Into my face as I sit alone;
If you answer true, you answer, No:
  The cheek is chill when the heart makes moan!

"If I were out, e'en out on the hill,
  One arm wrapped round me, I should be warm!
That strong arm round me would hold me still,
  Then I should not shake, or heed the storm:
Oh! to be out! out there on the hill!
  On the windy hill with one I know!
Out where the blast cuts bitterly chill!
  Out 'mid the ice and the frozen snow!"

Isabel sighed, then laughed at herself, and at her own "nonsensical, girlish verse-making." She left the window, and settled herself in the easiest chair before the fire, stirred up a brighter blaze, and took up the book she had laid down when daylight failed. She was waiting for her father, who had been in Caiston all day, busy about the unthankful task of "serving the public." He liked to come home before the lamps were lighted and the windows curtained, so Isabel lengthened out the idle time, which she did not much love.

The muffled sound of carriage wheels rolling over the snow roused Isabel from her firelight reading of a newly-received volume of fantastic foreign philosophy, which Leigh had sent her—"not because *I* like it, but because I think your ladyship will."

She was going down into the hall to meet her father; but, pausing on the staircase to pick up the flower that dropped from her brooch, she heard a strange voice, and retreated to her former seat hastily. Mr. Wold came into the drawing-room a few moments afterwards, and introduced to his daughter Mr. Carter, a gentleman who had come to Caiston upon business connected with the Danton property. "Not unpleasant business," Mr. Carter assured Isabel with a smile. Owing to some speculative investments made by the old lady, Mrs. Danton, having turned out well, the property left to the Wolds was considerably augmented.

"Rather fortunate this, Isabel, for you are somewhat extravagant, my dear—somewhat too much of a Lady Bountiful in every way," Mr. Wold said, when he and Isabel waited the re-appearance of their guest to go to the dining-room. "I do not complain," he said, hastening to avert her displeasure, "but I do not think you would have the slightest difficulty in disposing of an income ten times as large as ours. New music, books, dresses, lavish presents to your few friends—these things run away with the money, Isabel."

"I daresay they do, papa; but I wish you had told me if you thought me extravagant."

"Very comfortable this, Miss Wold, after the horrors of an English January day," Mr. Carter said, stationing himself by the fire, and surveying the brightly-lighted room. "The atmosphere of Caiston to-day was so substantial that it really required mastication to make it digestible."

When the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room after dinner, Mr. Wold remembered that he had forgotten to deliver to Isabel a letter he had, addressed to her.

"How long has it been in your possession, papa?" she asked, as he fumbled in his pocket-book.

"But since this afternoon, as I can testify," Mr. Carter said; "for we called at the post-office on our way out here, and then Mr. Wold obtained it."

"It is from Clara," Isabel remarked. Thereupon she wondered much, but consigned the letter to her pocket. She and Clara had never corresponded since Isabel's last short and painful visit to Burton Lacey.

Now Isabel, as she poured out coffee, listened intently for what should follow Mr. Carter's—

"You know Mr. Long, of Moor Hall, I think,"

"Yes; at least we did some years since," she replied.

"What a strange history his has been! But it really may be considered a blessing that his father is dead at last. He has poisoned enough of Long's life."

"Dead! I did not understand that. His father dead!" Mr. Wold exclaimed. "Strange that we had not heard of it—is it not, Isabel?"

Isabel could not speak just then, she was so busy with her father's cup.

"Eh? do you not think it is very strange?" her father repeated.

"I do not think so, papa. We have seen nothing of Mr. Long, or of any one who knew him, for some years now."

"That is true. How is Reginald Long's position affected by his father's death?" Mr. Wold asked of Mr. Carter.

"Most favourably. The father was killed in a duel nearly nine months since—the old sinner! Let the dead rest—but it is hard to say whether old Long were more weak or wicked; and I can't talk of him without anger. Such a career! so many victims! His son has paid all his debts and arranged his affairs, and will soon regain a good position, now there is no longer a constant drain upon him—especially as a distant relation has died most opportunely, and left him a handsome little property. It seems the fashion now for distant relations to act thus sensibly." Mr. Carter turned to Isabel with a smile; but Isabel did not seem to hear his remark.

"I hope that Long may now regain health and cheerfulness," Mr. Carter continued.

"Was he out of health?" Mr. Wold asked. "Pray tell us anything you know about him."

"He felt the shame of his father's life keenly, and the manner of his death was a terrible shock. He was on the

Continent at the time, was within a few miles of the place where the duel was fought, and heard the affair talked of in all directions. Old Long had assumed a fresh alias, so his son did not know how nearly this town-talk concerned him, when, as an Englishman, he was required to see the body, if possibly he might be able to identify it. It was his own father. Now only imagine the shock, Miss Wold."

"Most horrible!" Mr. Wold said. "Poor Long! poor Long! Indeed, he has been one of those who may truly say, 'I have fallen upon evil days!' He himself had so chivalrous a sense of honour—of Christian honour."

"Ay, he has suffered terribly—terribly! Well, well, now at least we will hope that all sort of good is in store for him—good house, good lands, good tenants, good friends. Last of all and best of all, we will wish him a good wife, Miss Wold;" and the lawyer, smiling politely, turned to Isabel, who smiled in return.

It was late when Isabel found herself alone in her own room, for she had lingered, lest any further information concerning Reginald Long should escape her.

"And all this time he has been suffering—terribly, terribly, they say:" she repeated these words dreamily. "It is over now, though. He will be rich and prosperous again soon, and he will marry—not the tradesman's daughter who '*never loved him*,' but some born lady, who will love him dearly. If you, Isabel, have been a dreaming fool, you will reap the punishment, bitter enough, of such idle pastime—to weep because he may now rejoice; to feel a poor bankrupt because he is now rich. Weep, indeed! Who talks of weeping, and for what?" Isabel laughed, but not in mirth. "I told him I would never marry him," she added; "circumstances help me to keep my word. That is well. No, it is *not*. Nothing is well," she added passionately.

She sat long before her dressing-room fire, her gown removed, her hair loose, and her wrapper bright in colour, picturesque in form—she was so dainty a lady—thrown round her carelessly.

Presently she remembered Clara's letter; it was found, opened, thus it ran:—

"Dear darling Isa,

"Oh, the pleasure it is to write those words again! Yet I am almost afraid. I won't think of the past; it was so painful, and I was only a child then.

[Here Isabel paused and coloured with anger. "So, of course my poor Richard is forgotten; his love was part of that 'painful' past. Now she is going to be married; that is what 'I was only a child then,' means," she muttered. "Well, I judged it would be thus."]

"You do believe, dear, that nothing but papa's *command* could have kept me silent all this weary while. Now he bids me write, and—oh, Isabel, how miserable I was for a long, long time! They thought I should die, and I longed to die. But I am not going to speak about the past.

"What I have to write to you now is so strange—so very strange. I think I must be dreaming, only I can see and feel this little emerald ring upon my finger."

["Engaged, of course. Oh, child! changeful child!" said Isabel; but kindly tears shone in her eyes.]

"Dear Isabel, do not turn scornful, and think me false and fickle. I cannot bear to fancy you angry with me. I hope very soon I may hear that your brother has married some one—I cannot say more worthy—because—but I will say I hope he, too, may find that he did not love last or best when he loved me.

"And you, Isabel, how could you help loving Reginald? He says you never loved him—he is sure that you never loved him. It was very long before I could believe that true. I cannot think how any one he loved could help loving him again. But you are so different from me. It seemed to me that you were so much more fit for him."

[The letter fell, fluttered into the grate. Blank, soulless eyes gazed at it; the hand that had held it still kept the attitude of holding it. So Isabel sat.

At length she feebly reached the letter; but when it lay upon her lap it was long before she strove to finish it—long before she could see those delicate characters. "It cannot be true," she said slowly at last, and endeavoured to read more.]

"But he loves me now, Isabel, and I am so glad and happy. I loved him first—I could not help it; I so longed to comfort him, he was so sad and ill; but I do not think he knew that I loved him first; he came to love me of his own accord, I hope.

"His love is partly your gift, Isabel; I like to think of that. He used to like to come and talk to me, because I loved you, praised you. We were much together abroad, and after we came home he went on coming to us. He is so

honest, so noble! He told me that he liked me, at first, as he should anything that you had loved. Oh, Isabel, how he loved you! Dear, if you could have loved him so! I would give him up, even now, if you loved him, and be content to stand by and see your great happiness."

["Child, would you, would you, would you? Oh, God! suppose I try you. But quiet, Isabel, this is no concern of yours; he knows you never loved him, ha! ha!"]

"I do not know why it is, Isabel, but I cannot feel quite content till you come to me. You, my old school friend, my mistress, almost my mother. I want to tell you all, to have you kiss me, bless me, bid me be happy. I want to see you take Reginald's hand and tell him you will love him as a brother, for we are sisters, though we have been so long parted. All you have done for me, all you have been to me, Isabel, comes back upon me so strongly. I love you, yes! almost as well as I love my Reginald.

"I know that sometimes you are fierce against sentimentality, and I am afraid of tiring you, so I have said little in praise of Reginald—how true, how gentle, how wise he is. If only you had known him as I do! but it is foolish to say so. Reginald says it was not God's will that you should love him. That if you had loved him the least, he should have found it out; that not even your proud dignity could have concealed it from him: that nothing could have kept him from claiming you. But you did not love him, that is so strange! He says he is sure you have a deep, most passionate power of loving, and that some day—but perhaps you are angry that any man talks so of you. Forgive him, it is only to me, you know.

"Just one thing more about him, that you may see how he trusts to my not being jealous; he saw you twice, just before he went away. Once in the wood, dressed in white, and looking very beautiful and sweet; another time you were playing, and the window was open—you were playing without notes, though you had music before you, and looking up almost as if you were praying—you were playing Leigh's music. He fancies that both times you were thinking of Leigh Engledew; if so, Isabel, how very proud and cunning you have been. Don't be angry, dear, I do like Leigh, the little I know of him.

"Now dearest, sweetest Isa, a favour. Come to us soon—I am to be married (the first time I have written those strange words) in the early summer or in the spring. Come

to me very soon, as soon as this dismal weather is over. I shall not be quite happy till you come. I can't tell why —but I sha'n't. You *will* come, if not, I will think—something terrible; of a dream, a wild, dreadful dream I had once, and cannot quite forget—about you and Reginald and me.

"Write soon. Papa begs you will come. Percy and Greville, and the boys and the children, all want you. Percy has grown quite manly-looking now; he has brought such a beard and moustache back from India with him, and I think the sufferings he witnessed—perhaps you have never heard that he was in the war, and was wounded, it is so long, so very long since he has left the army and—never mind, you *will* come, now, *soon*, and we will talk of everything that has happened since—I was going to tell you that I think dear Percy is very much improved by all he's gone through. Greville is as nice as ever; I should not wonder if he gave me a sister-in-law before long—but *you* are my sister.

"Again, write soon; I shall be in a fever of anxiety till I get a letter. Remember, I have no mother, darling Isabel, and no sister but you—you must come. You will come.

"Believe me, dearest Isa,

"Your ever loving little friend,

"CLARA BLANCHARD."

The letter finished, Isabel sat still some time. Then she re-perused it, reading aloud in a low, but distinct tone every innocently painful passage. She wished to get used to the sound of these things.

She wished to make herself familiar with the idea of how fondly, strongly she had been loved; of how completely such love was gone from her now, beyond any power of recall—gone out of her whole life! It was well to grow acquainted with these truths. It was needful that they should become tamely familiar; that they should lose all power to pain and startle!

Isabel did not try to sleep that night: she did not move from her chair. All night the logs blazed or smouldered on her hearth, and all night her wide-open eyes watched them unflinchingly.

It was a notable vigil! That night Isabel bade a final farewell to all the romance of youth; the pure, generous self-forgetfulness, which even in such a nature as hers is a large element in *first*-love. It was easier, though, for the girl to

put away the romance of Love, than for the woman to seal the fountain of Passion.

As soon as dawn broke over the snow she rose stiffly to lock her door, that the servant might not enter to make up up her fire, and assist at her toilette according to daily custom.

When a knock came, she answered that the fire had kept alight, and that she did not need any help.

She put away Clara's letter in her desk. It must be answered soon, and she should read it, too, many a time yet. Then she began to prepare for breakfast.

"It is so fortunate that you did not mean to marry him—that this does not matter much! That it is not Clara but Fortune who steps this time between you and him!" she said, looking into her own excited eyes. "You needed to love—you have loved—you will not love again! one life, one death, one love, for such as you! Yet, if indeed he had been poor, friendless, constant. If we had met—I think I could have brought myself to say—'Mr. Long, I refused you because you were prosperous; I will marry you now you are no longer so!'—No! God does not grant such happiness to any as might then have been mine!"

Though Isabel went down-stairs carefully and becomingly-dressed and with a prepared face, her father said looking at her anxiously—

"You do not appear as if you had slept well, my dear. It has been a severe night, and you look chilled! I almost feel this place is too cold for you in the winter, that we shall have to go on our travels again next autumn."

"Miss Wold comes down early—before the world is sufficiently aired for her, perhaps!" Mr. Carter remarked.

"It is a grim morning, indeed!" Isabel said, turning from her father to the breakfast table.

She was annoyed that her face told anything of the change that the night's meditation had wrought in her heart.

As her father's eyes, quickened by love, had penetrated through her heedfully-adjusted disguise, sufficiently to detect some change, some secret behind, Isabel dreaded his discovering yet more.

She strove to leave no pauses in the breakfast-table talk that should give him time to think, and perchance to remember Clara's letter, which had been unopened when they parted the evening before.

At every pause which did occur, she expected to hear him ask about its contents—the news, to communicate which the

silence of years had been broken. Isabel's dread grew feverish, a distrust of herself seized her—she fancied that when the question came she should meet it by a lie, and answer—"I have forgotten to read my letter yet." And her pride had not yet driven her to falsehood!

The chilled look vanished and was replaced by a feverish flush. Already she blushed with shame at her own degradation, called herself coward—liar—poor weak fool!

But Isabel was not put to the proof.

She saw her father and Mr. Carter driven off towards Caiston, and no allusion had been made to Reginald Long, the Blanchards, or that letter.

"Saved!" cried Isabel, "from what? from a lie!"

O strange contradiction of human pride! out of its own mouth is it confounded and brought to nought. Proud Isabel would have murdered her self-respecting pride by lying to save her pride from chance of being wounded by the pity of a father!

Danger past for the present, Isabel spent the day in a state of prostration. She made an effort to write a congratulatory letter to Clara, but gave up the attempt, murmuring, "Not yet! not quite yet!"

The fire was dim that night when Mr. Wold came home alone. Almost the first words he heard from his daughter were—

"Oh, papa! There was the most wonderful news in Clara's note. She is going to be married to Reginald Long! Ah! I thought you would be surprised!"

"Clara Blanchard going to be married to Reginald Long!" Mr. Wold repeated slowly. "Reginald Long going to marry Clara Blanchard!"

"It is quite true, papa." Then Isabel changed her lively tone for a sober one, and added—"I hope, papa, that Richard will not—not mind much. His letters have been very cheerful lately—I trust he has forgotten."

Oh, Isabel! actress! do not glory in your power—but writhe in self-contempt.

Mr. Wold repeated his former words several times that night. He said nothing more on this subject.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"DO YOU MISTRUST ME?"

"DO you mean to accept this invitation?" asked Miss Erlridge.

"Certainly! Papa and I have talked it over; and as Mr. Blanchard has made such pretty speeches about it, papa sees no objection to my gratifying Clara's wish. Did you think that, considering what occurred last time, it would be more dignified to refuse? Things are so completely changed."

"You know, Isabel, that that was not what I meant," Miss Erlridge said sadly. "It is not I who am wont to stand upon dignity, and dear Clara needs a friend; but ——"

"Suppose this time I should captivate Mr. Percy, the eldest son! I wonder poor Mr. Blanchard admits me; and I hear that Mr. Percy has a 'love of a moustache,' as Julia Darrall used to say."

Isabel spoke recklessly, though she only meant to speak gaily.

"I am very glad to see you gay, if your spirits are real," Miss Erlridge replied. "But ——"

"'But' again! You seem determined to damp my gaiety! You look so solemn this morning, my dear governess—just as you did when I was naughty at school."

"Do I?" asked Miss Erlridge abstractedly.

"Ay! and why should not my spirits be real? Am I not now I will make out a newspaper-like-list of concomitants of happiness,) beautiful, you see I am come to an age when I appraise myself highly, wealthy and highly accomplished—can you deny me either of these advantages?"

"I have no inclination to do so, Isabel."

"That tone makes them valueless."

"They are valueless by themselves."

"Oh! I ought to have added 'amiable;' but I *am* modest

on the score of my amiability—I am not 'an amiable young woman,' am I, Miss Erlridge?"

"Not that *par excellence*, certainly," Miss Erlridge smiled at last.

"I am sincerely glad to hear you say so."

"You might be a worse thing, you naughty child!"

"I am glad to see you smile at last."

"I am not in a very smiling humour, love."

"Nor I!" answered Isabel with an elaborate sigh; mocking the real one that rose spite of herself.

"Do not mock, Isabel."

"My mocking fiend is in possession."

"To return to the subject I am thinking about, very seriously and anxiously, love;—when do you talk of going to Burton Lacey?"

"I did not tell Clara exactly. I shall not leave home till the weather is mild—I cannot stand the cold."

"I see you cannot," Miss Erlridge answered gravely.

"I have never felt it so much as during the last few weeks. I am in a chronic state of teeth-chattering ague. I talk of taking up my quarters in the hot-house till the spring!"

"Your father said that you were not looking very well, but appeared to be in such excellent spirits that he thought it was only the cold weather that tried you."

"So I am in excellent spirits!" repeated Isabel.

"You have not let me see Clara's letters?"

"No! they are long and full of nonsense. Will it not be refreshing to be in the company of such lovers?"

"It ought to be refreshing to be within the influence of true love or true lovers." Miss Erlridge's meek eyes perused Isabel's fire-gazing face. Isabel felt them, and quickly looking up, said scornfully—

"The romance of the matter is rather spoilt, when we remember that one of these true lovers was nearly dying for love before."

"I must say I am old-fashioned enough to feel that that does rather spoil the romance, Isabel; but it need not, perhaps. Love does not change, but only the object of it. Clara was so very young!"

"Convenient doctrine, which I should not have expected to hear from your lips, dear Mistress Rachel!"

"We should judge charitably, Isabel!"

"Yes! I have a most wide charity for lovers. My housemaids are always getting married and leaving me; and my

neighbour, Mrs. Swayne, told me, the other day, that it was my own fault for giving them so many opportunities of improving the acquaintance of their male friends."

Miss Erlridge soon after rose to go; but she stood still before the fire instead: still, save for a slight wavering motion to and fro, which in her always denoted uneasiness of mind. Isabel chattered on, but Miss Erlridge paid no heed. At last she said, abruptly—

"Isabel, I will not be afraid of you! I will speak plainly; and you may be angry with me, dear, if you choose. I do not like your going to Burton Lacey!"

"Do you mistrust me?" Isabel asked, pride darting lightnings from all her face: she felt brought to bay. She knew that Miss Erlridge possessed her secret, knew this as well as if it had been spoken of between them, which it never had.

"Dear child, if only you mistrusted yourself, I would trust you more quietly. Isabel, I entreat that you will not be rash!"

"What do you fear?" was demanded imperiously.

"The wrecking of your own happiness and that of others."

"Do you doubt my honour? Do you think I could betray my friend? That I would stoop to betray myself even?"

"As I said, if you mistrusted yourself, I could more happily trust you."

"But I will not mistrust myself," she answered violently. "And do not you dare misjudge and mistrust me! I did not think that *you* would have thought so meanly of me! What right have you to pry into my heart, and find out what I choose to hide?"

"Gently, my poor child, gently! I am sorry to grieve you, to anger you. But I love you. Out of my love I have found courage to speak. Be meek, be prudent!—stay at home—do not put yourself or others into temptation. It is not only for you I fear!"

"Meek—prudent—I will not be! I will dare all—try my strength—show how rightly I may trust my pride—my sense of honour—my—anything you please to call it. To turn coward, and own to others what I do not and will not allow true to myself even! Isabel Wold will not act so!"

"May Isabel Wold never repent that she did not act so!" said Miss Erlridge, solemnly. "I will not presume to meddle

with your own feelings—to speak of the peril of endangering, destroying your own peace of mind. But I will speak of Clara, think of her. Tremble, dear, lest, for no good to yourself, and with no evil thought or intention, you should dash her cup of happiness from her lips—for her sake ——"

"How can my presence, the presence of her own best friend, endanger Miss Blanchard's happiness? Her own best friend—her sister, she calls me!—shall I do her anything but good? What do you think I am, that you speak to me so?" Isabel was trembling with anger.

"I think that you are a woman of strong passions and great pride—that you are all the weaker for being so proud—so self-reliant."

"Strong passions I may have, but I have a will too—a will that can control passion—that could strengthen my weak flesh to suffer a martyr's death rather than own a thought or feeling of which I should be ashamed. Miss Erlridge! say no more to me, I cannot bear it! What can you think me? You, who I fancied knew me—respected me! You to turn against me—to suspect me!"

"Isabel, I love you, and every night and morning I pray for you! Isabel, I think sometimes that I almost know a mother's love for you. I will trust in God that He will answer my prayers in His time, and in any way, by any means, turn your heart to Him. I see I can do nothing! Child! my child! do not turn from me! Calm yourself!—Still love me, Isabel!"

Miss Erlridge knelt by Isabel's chair. Presently a few scalding drops came down Isabel's hot cheeks. Then she wept a passionate flood of tears; wept as she had not wept since she was a child, yet how unchildishly! Her tears testified to a strong agony no child's heart could bear. And how she trembled! She seemed stricken beyond belief.

Poor Miss Erlridge was obliged to leave as soon as Isabel was a little calm. Keenly she reproached herself. No good was done, and all this pain inflicted.

Isabel, dashing away her tears, said proudly as ever—

"I shall go! You shall see how justly I can trust myself. You shall learn not to distrust me for the future!"

Miss Erlridge hardly ever knew rest in this life. She was always bearing somebody's burden; Isabel's pressed heavily on her drooping frame as she went home. But she said in self-consolation—

"I trust I have done no harm. I have roused her pride. That is well, as it is all she has to trust to. I may, too, have wakened some suspicion of herself, to put her on her guard; and that is also well: so I trust I have done no harm, and that God will guard and guide her. At least I meant well."

Miss Erlridge was only not broken by much bearing of heavy burdens, because she knew upon what staff to lean.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I CAN TRUST MYSELF."

IT was a late, bitter cold spring. Isabel was not strong, and her father was very anxious.

It was not till towards the end of May that Isabel went to Burton Lacey. Clara's wedding was to take place in June.

Mr. Blanchard and his eldest son met her at the station. Her father had accompanied her half way, on his route elsewhere! and she was attended by her own maid.

Clara was sitting in the carriage outside the station. Clara had hurt her foot, and could not walk, Isabel was told.

It was an unfortunate accident; for it might delay the wedding a little while; and nobody wished that, now that the preparations were so far advanced.

"How cruel of you, Miss Wold," Mr. Percy said from under his moustache, as he helped Isabel from the carriage, "to put off coming for so long. Greville and I are obliged to be in London to-morrow, about that Chancery business; and we sha'n't be home again till the 'eve of the auspicious event,' as the papers say."

"The spring has been so cold, I have not felt inclined to leave home," Isabel said, adding—

"We may as well go to Clara. My servant can claim my boxes."

She took Percy's proffered arm.

"I hope that Miss Wold will be induced to honour Burton Lacey with her presence for some time, after the departure of our bride," Mr. Blanchard said, as he led the way to the carriage.

"I shall not wish to be long absent from my father," she answered. Her manner expressed a sense of hostility to her host, spite of his graciousness.

Clara's caresses, when Isabel took her seat beside her, were formal and preliminary—an earnest of what were to come when they were alone.

Her accident and the weather were the topics of conversation on the homeward ride.

Isabel did not learn what she wanted to know—whether Reginald Long were now at Burton Lacey; if not, when he was expected there?

Percy, sitting opposite the ladies, inspected Isabel admiringly, stroking his moustache complacently, till he received a haughty look which extinguished him — for a time quite destroying his belief in his own irresistible attractions.

As he helped his sister into the house, he remarked—

"I think you are a little fool to have that Miss Wold here? she is much handsomer than you are; and I always thought she and Long were taken with each other."

"Percy, I wish you would not say such things; I can't bear to hear them. Let Greville help me into the house, you are not strong enough yet."

Clara was angry only for half a moment.

"It is so vexing my being lame!" Clara exclaimed, when she and Isabel were up-stairs alone; "I cannot be a proper mistress of the house, and show you how well I have profited by all your lessons, and I cannot do half the things I wanted to do to show how glad I am to see my darling Isa."

"We shall get on very well, dear; I will be your walking-stick."

"I shall soon have a longer and stronger one, you know!" Clara said, with a blush and a very bright smile.

"Yes, of course. How strange of me! I had almost forgotten! Is Mr. Long staying here now?"

"No; but we expect him soon—perhaps to-night. I almost hope, though, that he may not come till to-morrow, because some people dine with us to-day—some of them friends of Percy's, whom, I know, Reginald does not like. Percy and Reginald never get on very well together." Clara looked sorry for an instant, then added gaily—

"Now mind you make yourself charming, Isa. But I believe you cannot help it! You are even more lovely than you used to be, dear."

"You are even more of a flatterer, perhaps, Clara. *You* look blooming enough!"

"I am so happy. Isa! how *could* you help loving him?"

"Clara, you must not speak in that way; it is not fitting.

Of course I shall say nothing against your future husband—indeed, I know of nothing against him. But what attracts you, might yet repel me. I beg you will never allude to this subject again."

"I will not! Darling, do not be angry; only I have so wondered. There's Mary tapping at the door. Make haste down into the drawing-room, Isabel, and perhaps we shall get some time to ourselves before people come. I must hobble away to dress."

When Clara was gone, Isabel sat down at the dressing-table, looked at herself in the glass, and for a long time did not stir.

Her dress and its appurtenances were laid out ready for her. Spite of her dainty, fine-lady ways, Isabel could not submit to be dressed by a servant; so her maid only put finishing touches to her toilet.

When she was roused from her musing by the ringing of the first bell, she hastily made herself ready, and went down. But only Percy was in the drawing-room.

"My sister is probably reading her love-letter over and over!" he said; "she has just had one to say that Long is not coming to-night. I hope you have plenty of fortitude, Miss Wold. Lovers are dreadful beings, and Clara is in very deep—You will have a sad life of it. I quite pity you!"

"I am glad to see your sister so happy," Isabel answered, seating herself in the chair he had placed for her, experiencing a sense of relief from the knowledge that she should not meet Mr. Long that day; yet she eagerly desired to have the meeting over.

"As fond of music as you used to be?" Mr. Percy asked, surveying his boots.

"Quite as fond," Isabel replied.

"Clara has been practising most diligently. Long likes music!"

"Very right of Clara to pay all deference to Mr. Long's tastes," was answered with profound gravity.

"Of course! If that sort of thing were likely to last after marriage—I really should think of marrying myself. It must be so pleasant to have a beautiful creature entirely devoted to one."

"No doubt, very pleasant!" was answered in the same sage tone. "You had better wait and see if that sort of thing does last after marriage."

"But I feel myself getting quite elderly. I am actually past five-and-twenty. The men I used to know most of are all married and sobered now; and I think I am somewhat sobered myself! When I was out in India, I saw the reality of some things I had been inclined to think humbug before—saw human nature tried to the utmost, and proving itself made of strong, good stuff. Does a man good to be amidst death and danger—makes him *think*, Miss Wold!—takes a great deal of nonsense and senseless pride out of one. A man's a man on the battle-field!"

"I should imagine that it must be so. I hope it made you think to some serious purpose, Mr. Percy!"

Isabel spoke absently, spite of herself. She was wondering what Clara's "love-letters" were like.

"Believe it did. Hope I sha'n't forget all the resolutions I made then and there. Nothing would settle me, and make 'a solid character' of me so soon as marriage, I believe."

"I hope the wound I heard of your having received has healed!" Isabel said, to change the conversation.

His handsome face kindled as he answered—

"Very kind of you to remember it. Oh, yes, I'm all right—only I am, aw—very sorry I am going away to-morrow."

Isabel could not suppress a smile. Just then Clara came in, leaning on her father's arm.

The expected guests arrived soon after. Mr. Blanchard was very ceremonious in introducing Isabel. She was a stranger to them all; and her appearance, and the conciliating deference with which her host treated her, created an impression that she was a person of importance. So treated, Isabel grew animated and brilliant.

Mr. Percy Blanchard took her in to dinner; and, as he was leaving next day, he made the most of this opportunity of doing the agreeable to his sister's beautiful friend.

It was a relief to Isabel, that he was occupied by his friends and guests in the evening. When she had done her duty at the piano, and retired to a quiet corner, Greville came and sat by her, and they had some serious talk, as had been their custom formerly.

Greville liked to speak to Isabel about his mother, for whom he yet mourned deeply in his heart. He talked to her also, as young men like to talk to women older than themselves, of his aspirations and his difficulties—his deep sense of want of work—his ignorance of where to seek it—the objections he found to all the professions, except that

of literature, which it would pain his father for him to follow—for which, too, he modestly distrusted his own worthiness.

Isabel could not give him much counsel; but she could listen well—so well, that if she did not sympathise keenly, if her thoughts wandered sometimes, he did not perceive it, and he was quite satisfied.

Both Isabel and Clara where glad when the evening was over. Clara had been obliged to use her foot a little more than was right, and it was very painful. Isabel was a-weary —from the fatigue of her short journey only, of course! For that night she excused herself from any long, confidential talk with Clara, and went at once to her own room.

The two young men left next day. Mr. Blanchard was shut up with his lawyer, fussily busy in hindering business. The two girls had a quiet day together—such as Clara desired and Isabel somewhat dreaded—such as Clara enjoyed and Isabel found almost intolerable. Clara's foot continued very painful, and she spent the day on the sofa. Reginald was coming on the morrow—it must be better then!

In the soft spring twilight Isabel wandered out—walked about the grounds and paced up and down the terrace—seeking rest and calm; instead, finding feverish excitement in recalling the thoughts that had often occupied her there before. But these thoughts—the wondering, perplexing, paining, pleasing thoughts that her varying moods had presented—it was not safe to recall now: so Isabel went back towards the house and Clara—Reginald Long's happy, loving bride. She had thrown a small shawl of heavy, black lace over her head and shoulders, when she went out; had gathered a red rose from the conservatory and stuck it in her hair; she had more roses in her hands, brought in to delight Clara. She was a fit picture of evening as she stepped from the outside duskness into the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room, where she had left Clara lying on a couch, half asleep in the twilight.

Isabel was singing a verse of a wild German air, and arranging her bouquet, as she came in at the window, open still as she had left it. She assumed a very lively tone in her intercourse with Clara, partly to deceive her friend, partly to repress her tender confidences.

Advancing to the centre of the room, without looking up from her flowers, she stood beneath the light, saying, "Such a bouquet for you, Clara!" No answer came. Suddenly her

song ceased, and she became conscious of a presence that was not Clara's.

The sofa was empty. Reginald Long stood turned from her, looking into the fire, from which he moved his gaze slowly.

This sudden meeting was easier for Isabel. The shock roused all her strength.

"Mr. Long," she said, "I did not know you were come. Have you seen Clara? I left her here. We did not expect you till to-morrow."

Mr. Long touched Isabel's offered hand—saw how radiantly beautiful she was—did not look long enough to see the colour fade and leave her face of a greyish white.

"Miss Blanchard has just left the room. I fancy she has gone to look for you."

"Oh! Perhaps I had better not go after her, then, or we may miss each other. Be so good as to ring the bell, Mr. Long. I will put these roses in water before they fade!" Isabel spoke carelessly, staying in the room because conscious of a cowardly desire to run away.

Mr. Long obeyed her then—stood leaning against the mantel-piece, his head thrown back and a cold pride in his eyes, as he watched Isabel toss over her roses. Her perfect self-possession and cold negligence of manner offended him. At least they had been friends! He had paid her the greatest compliment a man can pay a woman. She should have shown a little embarrassment—a little warmth. Was she really heartless?

"Some water in this vase," Isabel said to the servant, "and tell Miss Blanchard that I am in the drawing-room."

"She speaks as if she were mistress here!" Mr. Long inwardly commented.

"Are not these roses early? I think Mr. Blanchard's gardener is very skilful," Isabel observed, as she bent down over the flowers, intent upon putting each rose in the place where it would contrast most favourably with its neighbours.

"Yes, they are early," Mr. Long replied shortly, not having glanced at them. As Isabel crossed the room, to put the vase of flowers on the table by Clara's sofa, her dress brushed against Mr. Long's feet. He drew back from the contact. The rose fell from her hair, and lay near him on the hearth-rug. He would not see it—presently put his foot upon it heedlessly.

"Perhaps Mr. Long is sane now—is quite cured of his

absurd radicalism, and is not pleased that a shopkeeper's daughter should be here as his bride's friend," Isabel said to herself, his manner suggesting such thoughts to her pride, ever ready to take alarm. "But I suppose she consulted him!"

Isabel threw the lace from off her head—sought and found her work. She was trying herself. She sat down; and as she threaded an embroidery needle, holding needle and cotton with steady hand close to a lamp, she said—

"I must take this, the earliest, opportunity, Mr. Long, of congratulating you on your having won so sweet a little lady as my friend Clara. I wish you all happiness. You both deserve to be happy."

He bowed his head and said coldly—

"I thank you."

Then the whole expression of his face changed, softened—his eyes and mouth smiled tenderly, as he went forward to meet Clara, who entered by the door at the opposite end of the room. Oh! the passionate pain that went to Isabel's heart—to see that light come into his face and not for her! She smiled, and said—"Talk of an angel——"

Mr. Long helped Clara to the sofa.

"Oh, Isabel! I have been looking for you to tell you that Reginald was come!" Clara exclaimed. Blushes and smiles were thick upon her face as Mr. Long, quite grave again, brought her a cushion and tried to settle her comfortably, expressing his sorrow that she was still so lame.

"You see I came in from the garden, and discovered Mr. Long for myself. Have I not found you beautiful roses?"

"Lovely!" and Clara, bending over the flowers, showed a cheek almost as bright-tinted as the brightest rose. She looked up—Mr. Long was steadily regarding the fire. Half shy, half tender, and wholly sweet were Clara's look and voice, as she asked—

"Are you tired to-night, Reginald?"

"Somewhat," he answered. "I have been hard at work lately."

"You must not work hard enough to make you look so worn," Clara said, with a pretty assumption of wife-like demureness and authority.

Reginald answered nothing, save with his eyes. Under them Clara's cheek grew yet brighter. Then succeeded a long silence. One or two efforts Isabel made to break it. But her lively remarks rung so false on her own ears, that she thought others must know them as counterfeits.

It was a relief when Mr. Blanchard came in. He greeted his son-in-law elect most cordially, and seemed very full of business. He told Clara that she looked sleepy, and Miss Wold that she looked pale, and advised them both to go to rest. Isabel was nothing loth. But she could not avoid going to Clara's room; and she had to stay there, listening to Clara's happy talk for a long while. When she gained her own room at last—

"You have acted well," she said, looking at herself, "passing well. He no longer either likes or admires you. Clara is in no danger from you. It is his turn now to be proud and haughty. He means to make you feel that he repents of his past folly!"

Then Isabel sat motionless awhile, leaning back in her chair, still looking into her own eyes. Presently she started nervously, and veiled them with her fingers, as if afraid to gaze longer into the depths of their darkness. What evil thoughts had she seen glaring out from her soul? She rose and walked once or twice up and down the room.

"It is disagreeable to lose power one has once had!" she said. "It is humiliating! it hurts me! Why should we not be friends? Clara's husband must be my friend! or Clara will not be happy! I will win back a little of his old liking. I can trust myself. I shall be able to go as far as is right, as I choose, and not one step further. Yes, I can trust myself!"

Then Isabel went to bed. She had wild dreams. In them imagination and passion ran riot. Will and pride slumbered. She shuddered, remembering them in the morning, but by no means regarded them as warnings. Hideously black they looked, as she gazed out into the pure morning brightness!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

QUESTIONABLE GROUND.

THE May morning was balmy, yet fresh. Isabel found the air reviving and bracing after her troubled night; she was out betimes, beneath the lilacs and laburnums, pacing the terrace.

Mr. Long came down to walk there also. Catching sight of Isabel's muslin skirt, he would have turned back, but she had seen him, so he solemnly advanced towards her.

"What a pity poor Clara cannot be out!" was Isabel's first exclamation, after she and Mr. Long had shaken hands, and remarked upon the beauty of the weather.

"I hope that in a day or two Miss Blanchard will be able to walk again. I believe the sprain was a slight one," he replied.

Mr. Long stood still, looking over the woods to the distant sparkling sea. Isabel surveyed him as he stood there, in the strong sunlight, wearing nothing on his head—to see if he were changed.

Did he not like that she should call his bride Clara, that he said "Miss Blanchard" so ceremoniously? Evidently he did not choose that any stranger should meddle with his joy. Isabel a stranger to his joy!

His hair was growing grey—he looked many years older than when she had seen him last, and over all his bearing lingered the depressed air of a much-tired man, whose cup of trial would brim over with one drop more.

He turned round upon her.

"You find me altered?" he asked.

"I also am altered," she answered evasively, shading her eyes from the sunlight and from his glance. "I shall go in now, and see if Clara is down yet."

So saying, she left him. Before she had gone far, he heard her clear voice ringing out from Donizetti's "Sorge l'Alba," "Come Angiol io ti adoro come donna t'amero,"

The words rang out with strangely pure distinctness on the morning air :—

> "Tu mia bella, tu dormi ancor,
> Fedele amante t'attende ognor."

"Completely she has forgotten !—and have I not done the same? I loved her, she did not love me; so my work was harder. Why should I be angry, and nourish resentful feelings," thought good Mr. Long. "But she is surely changed for the worse, changed into a mere brilliant woman of the world, with nothing of sweetness or tenderness about her."

Shortly after they met at the breakfast table.

"And how do your alterations at Moor Hall progress? I suppose you meet with much delay, and experience much annoyance, from the dilatoriness and slowness of comprehension of your workmen?" Mr. Blanchard spoke with his usual deliberation.

"No, the men work well; I have nothing to complain of. There are some things I do not mean to have done till there is a mistress at Moor Hall." Mr. Long looked at Clara; but when Mr. Blanchard said to Isabel—

"Do you know Moor Hall at all, Miss Wold?" he turned a searching glance upon her.

She felt it, but would not meet it, and answered, "I once had the pleasure of being a guest there for a few days."

"Ah, yes, you left to come to me when ——" Clara stopped short and looked at her father. He understood.

"That is more than four years since, then," Mr. Blanchard said, and sighed. "I shall have a solitary house soon," he added.

"You will know where to find another home, Sir," Mr. Long said.

"Yes, yes; but I don't mind solitude. I like my own ways in my own house, thank you."

"You will soon have companions in Rose and Ellen. What tall young ladies they are shooting up into!"

"I am going to send them to our good friend, Miss Erlridge for a while, at Clara's particular wish."

"I am glad of that—I shall often see them," Isabel said.

"I shall feel indebted to you if you will have them at the Manor House to see you occasionally, Miss Wold."

"Manor House! Have you changed your residence?"

This was the first direct question Mr. Long had put to Isabel, save "Am I altered?" It startled her a little, but she answered laughingly—

"*We* still call our home Wrangham Farm; but since we have made some of the great rooms habitable, our friends try to thrust upon us the dignity of the Manor House."

"And indeed it is a noble manor house—quite worthy of that title; especially as your father has become holder of so much property round it. He is quite a Lord of the Manor." Mr. Blanchard spoke patronisingly.

"Farm or Manor House, we love the place," Isabel said, warmly.

"What are your plans for the morning?" Mr. Blanchard asked, as he was about to leave the breakfast-room. "I suppose, Clara, my love, you cannot well ride?"

"No; she must not try," Mr. Long answered, authoritatively.

"But Isabel and Reginald might, papa. They are both fond of riding."

"I shall drive you out in the pony-chaise," Mr. Long replied.

"Dr. Mason said I had better not do even that to day. I should like you and Isabel to have a nice ride, it is such a lovely morning."

"I shall be occupied this morning; I have letters to write," Isabel said.

"And I have no intention of being banished from Clara. I will read to you, while you work. I have a new book that you will not find so dry as one I tried to make you like the other day," Mr. Long smiled indulgently.

So it was settled, and Isabel went to her own room. Some hours after, she looked into the room where Clara and Reginald were, with her bonnet on.

"Where are the children and Mrs. Ratford?" she asked. "I have not heard or seen them this morning."

"Didn't I tell you? They are going to stay at Swanton for a few days. Did you want them? Where are you going?"

"Only to the post." Isabel came further into the room, and noted that Clara looked a little drowsy—Mr. Long rather dull.

"We can send your letters, dear," Clara said.

"I know you can; but I want the walk. I was going to take the children with me. Good-bye."

"Reginald, I know you are longing to be out this beautiful morning. Go with Isabel."

Isabel had left the room.

"I do not suppose Miss Wold wishes for my company."

"Now, Reginald," Clara said, "remember that Isabel is my one own friend, and I cannot afford to have you two disagreeable to each other. Go with her, and be kind and pleasant. Oh, she has been so good to me! You cannot think how loving and tender she is when people are in trouble, though she sometimes seems proud and stern."

Reginald shut Clara's lips with a kiss. "Good, generous little friend! To please you I will go."

So a few minutes after he overtook Isabel.

"I have orders to walk with you," he said abruptly.

"I hope Clara does not think I mind walking alone. I like it."

"I remember that you do.'

Isabel winced.

"You have not asked for Wolf," she said. "He is a travelled and accomplished dog now."

"He must be growing old."

"Oh, no; he is in the prime of life."

"Yes, of course. I had forgotten. It seems so long ago."

Just then Isabel, in her effort to fasten a refractory button on her glove, dropped her letters. One to her father, one to Richard, one to Leigh, one to Miss Erlridge.

Mr. Long picked them up.

"Two of my letters are to travel far, you see—one to America, one to Germany."

Mr. Long questioned about Leigh, and Isabel gave him a full, true, and perfectly unembarrassed account of Leigh's position and prospects, and of her own visit to his neighbourhood.

"He has not married any fair maiden of Germany yet?"

"No. I wish he would; I should like a German sister-in-law."

"Mr. Engledew's wife would bear no such relation to you."

"Not in reality, but yet in fact, if the distinction is allowable."

Mr. Long was silent some little while—then he plunged into the subject of foreign travel. He and Isabel compared their experiences and impressions. They both grew animated.

And, in the talk, points of sympathy were touched, flashes

of kindred feeling elicited, spite of the external matter-of-fact tone they both tried to give to the conversation.

They had a lively, friendly talk, and, to Clara's delight, came home apparently in much better humour with each other than they had gone out. The ice of Mr. Long's half-resentful reserve was broken.

Clara's foot got better very slowly. Reginald and Isabel were constantly thrown together. Some part of each day they walked or rode out without other companions; Clara would have it so. Reginald came to look forward to these walks—Isabel to expect his company.

It was all Clara's doing—she was so anxious that these two should be friends. They thought that they were learning to be friends, and only friends—thought that now they might safely be friends. The tone of their intercourse was calm, kind, confiding. The whole world might have heard every syllable they exchanged. Yet—Reginald trusted all to his love for his sweet Clara, to his knowledge that she loved him, and that Isabel had never loved him; he saw no danger.

Isabel trusted to herself, her honour, her pride, her self-command: she never prayed for deliverance from tempatation. After a time she even scorned to believe herself in a position of any danger or difficulty. She was learning to feel a sisterly affection for Reginald Long. It was pleasant to have such a brotherly friend. As was often her wont, she gave herself up to keen enjoyment of the present. So things went on for two weeks, two dreamily sweet and lovely weeks.

Isabel would tell herself—"He has forgotten all his love for you; he is slowly learning friendship for his future wife's best friend. If any sudden glance or hasty word of his startled her slumbering consciousness and recalled the past, she would say some phrase of this kind to herself the oftener and the more positively. Ah! but also she would now and then imitate the tone in which he sometimes said her name, or called her his friend!

There came a change: Isabel's false peace gradually failed her.

CHPTER XXXIV.

"I LOVE YOU!"

REGINALD, Isabel, and Clara were out on the upper garden terrace early one fine morning. Clara was leaning on Reginald's arm; she had been taking her first walk. She had not chosen that Isabel should stay in-doors, as Isabel had wished to do. Clara little knew what pain her innocent tyrannies inflicted on her friend. They all stood still, looking out over the quivering life and loveliness of the young summer day. Dew was in those sunny violets—Isabel's eyes. Her hat was hanging from her arm by its strings, and the sunshine poured down unheeded upon her absorbed face, which was as a face of Parian marble, save for a slight fluttering of the lips.

Clara said suddenly, her eyes having wandered from the landscape to her friend, "Isabel, how thin and white you look! Are you ill?" Up flew the colour into Isabel's startled face. The action of her heart was quickened by a lighter thing sometimes than this abrupt interruption of her reverie.

"Reginald, does not her face look almost transparent with this sunshine on it?" Clara asked.

Mr. Long's eyes followed Clara's; they met Isabel's, full of grave, concerned observance. He said nothing. The fluttering of Isabel's lips increased so much that she pressed her hand upon her mouth to still them. Then she flung her brown hat on, and said—

"The sunshine shall not fall upon my face, if it is so discourteous. Remember, Miss Clara, my face is older than yours, and cannot bear daylight so well."

"But indeed, dear, are you not ill? You must not joke with me; I am serious. I am sure you must feel ill."

"No, fanciful fair one; I am well enough. But you have been standing a long time. She had better rest her foot now, Mr. Long."

Isabel did not even glance at Reginald as she spoke.

Mr. Long and Clara returned to the house, and Isabel

went down to walk on the lower terrace. Her peace was gone; many sleepless nights and days of false seeming had wearied her. Now, as she threw herself on the fresh turf, and pressed her burning lips upon it, she was conscious of a passionate desire to cast off the "burden of being," to lie under the sod, and be for ever at rest.

The sun grew hot upon the place where she lay; all the brightness seemed to mock her; she felt sick and weak. Even the glad singing of the birds was torture: she wanted dark, cold, quiet. Most of all, she wanted to hide herself from her own consciousness.

She rose and turned towards the house. In the wood she met Mr. Long.

"I fear you are ill," he said. "Our walks and rides have been too long."

Too much tenderness in the eyes, in the voice, to be mistaken. But what right had Isabel's heart to rejoice in this tenderness?—what right after such languid beating to bound so at his tone?

"I think they have been too long." Isabel put out her hand, feeling for support. He remembered the gesture in the old room over the shop at Caiston, more than three years ago. Eagerly he offered his arm; she had already leant against a tree. "The sun is so hot—it turned me giddy. How it scorches on these early summer days!" she said, smiling up at what she could not see. All was darkened and wavering before her eyes.

"Will you get me some water?" she said, smiling blindly still. It was well she was blind to the eyes fastened upon her white face.

He had some distance to go to the gardener's cottage to procure water. When he came back Isabel was gone. While, full of vague alarm, he looked for her, she gained her own room, going to the house by another way.

She locked herself into her room, plunged her head into cold water, and when she felt better, congratulated herself upon her triumph—insolently, perhaps.

"It was a grand victory, but a deadly struggle! I am wounded—badly wounded. I am glad he goes to-morrow—does not come again before the eve of the wedding. He loves me—loves me still—though he does not know it. Any hint that I have loved him—then—poor Clara! Oh, Isabel, be true to your friend: yet most false!"

She threw herself upon the bed, drew the curtain between

her eyes and the light, and tried to sleep. But continual shiverings of nervous excitement ran through her limbs, and kept her awake.

She stilled herself at last, by a great effort of will, and was just beginning to feel the languor of sleep steal over her, when some one knocked at the door, and Clara's voice called anxiously—

"Are you here, Isabel?"

"No rest! no peace!" Isabel muttered, and sprang up to open the door.

"I am not very well, and I was just falling asleep. Why do you look frightened? I suppose I have a stupefied look. I was just going to sleep."

"Lie down again, dear. Why would you say you were not ill?"

"I was not."

"There, let me put the pillow thus. Why, your hair is wet!"

"I have not been trying to drown myself. I only put my head in the basin. I often do—at least, sometimes—when it aches."

"Your head is so hot, although your face is white. I shall send the doctor to you."

"No! I desire that you do not. Just leave me for one hour, and I will come down rested, and in my right mind. Perhaps I got a slight sunstroke. The sun glared down fiercely upon the terrace."

"I will tell Reginald you are safe, then. He came in to me, looking frightened, and asked, 'Where is she? where is Isabel?' You came into the house while he was getting you the water, I suppose."

"Yes. I found I could do without it."

"But you alarmed him very much. He looked so strange when he came in and asked me where you were, that I was frightened too."

"There, that will do! Go, dear—you make my head worse."

"Kiss me first—just once."

Isabel complied, and then was left in peace—such peace as her own thoughts allowed her. Sleep did not come near her again.

At the end of an hour she got up, made her toilet for the evening, and went down-stairs. She was reading in the drawing-room, when Reginald and Clara came in from a

drive, driven home early by the stormy weather. Both made eager enquiries.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Long, for despatching you on a bootless errand; but I felt better, and determined to go and lie down while I could reach the house. Clara told me you were much mystified."

"You should have waited for Reginald's arm to help you in-doors," Clara said.

Mr. Long bowed, and made no reply. Isabel had looked towards him, not at him, while she spoke. Now she resumed her book till Mr. Blanchard came, and, seating himself beside her, asked how she had managed to get through the hot morning—whether she were not getting tired of Burton Lacey, and so on. Mr. Long listened to each word she gave in answer, though he appeared to be busy with the just-arrived *Times*. Once or twice she knew that he was looking at her. She always felt his look when it was turned upon her.

It was a wet, cold evening after the bright morning. There was a cheery fire in the drawing-room, and it seemed welcome; for close round it sat Mr. Blanchard, Reginald, and Clara—Clara on the couch, Reginald close to her. Mr. Blanchard fell asleep. Clara was in a talkative mood this evening. She sometimes talked to Reginald as she never had talked to any one else but Isabel, confiding to him many innocent child's thoughts and pretty pure fancy. The firelight flickered merrily now on the earnest eyes raised to Reginald's face—more than once he bent down and kissed her.

Isabel had been asked to play. She was a long while turning over her music near the piano at the far end of the great room. When she played, it was from no music at all, but out of her own mournful thoughts. She was quite in obscurity, and could watch the fireside group. She saw that her music was not heeded, and played but for her own pleasure.

"Go and ask her to play that curious piece she used to play so often when I was at Wrangham Farm," Clara said by-and-by to Reginald.

"What is its name?"

"I do not know. She composed it herself. It is not so sad as what she has been playing."

Mr. Long did not move.

"Go, please," Clara said.

Mr. Long obeyed with apparent reluctance.

Very slowly he approached Isabel, and preferred Clara's request in a low, hesitating voice.

"Give me the book lying there, then. I have it written down," Isabel said hurriedly. Her tone to him was often almost rude.

He reached it and put it on the music-stand, saying—

"I will bring you a light."

Something fell upon his hand—a hot tear! He started.

"No light! I will not have a light!" Isabel returned quickly.

He bent down low. "What is this?—why, what does this mean? You are ill—unhappy! Have confidence in me—treat me as a—friend; do not repel me."

He spoke in a passionate whisper, and tried to take her hand.

"Go!" she said, with suppressed agitation.

"Please play it, Isabel!" Clara begged, from her soft, warm corner.

"Pray favour us, Miss Wold," Mr. Blanchard said, just rousing up from his nap at the cessation of Isabel's music.

"Isabel, speak to me—tell me ——"

"Go!" she repeated, imperiously now.

Mr. Long retreated to the table, not to his seat near Clara, and took up the newspaper. He faced the windows, across which the curtains were not yet drawn. The rain had ceased, and the moon was struggling through the clouds. The wind sighed about gustily.

The music broke off, and Clara and Mr. Blanchard thanked the performer, who answered not a word.

A quarter-of-an-hour after, Clara said—

"Where is Isabel gone, I wonder?"

"Into the garden. I saw her pass the window," Mr. Long replied, from behind his paper.

"Isn't it raining?"

"No, it is fine."

"But everything must be very wet."

"Yes; I daresay it is damp."

"Isabel will take cold."

"I should not be surprised," Mr. Long returned. "If young ladies will act so imprudently, they must take the consequences."

The dry tone of this remark silenced Clara for a time.

Mr. Blanchard's slumbers had grown more profound. Clara delayed ringing for tea, that she might not disturb

him. He had passed several bad nights, he said. Clara was quite content with her work and her happy thoughts.

Another quarter-of-an-hour passed.

"I wish you would go and look for Isabel, Reginald."

"No, no!" he answered impatiently, and bent lower over the *Times.*

Presently Clara said—

"Reginald, *pray* go and look for her! I know she is ill. She may get a fever and die from being out in this damp. If you please, go."

"Good God! Clara, you do not know what you ask!" Mr. Long exclaimed, very low, rising as he spoke.

"Thank you! Do not go without your hat, and ask her to come in to tea," Clara pursued placidly, not having heard his thick-spoken words.

He went out. There was an interval of bright moonlight, and many times he started from black shadows cast by the shrubs upon the lawn, thinking he had found her whom he sought.

He looked for her in vain in the gardens—then went through the wet wood down to the lower terrace.

At the far end he found her sitting in the shadow on the wet turf. Her head was bowed down upon her knees, and her whole frame shaken by sobs. When he was close upon her he paused. He was afraid—afraid of her—afraid of his own strong-beating heart!

Then he obeyed an ungovernable impulse—sprang to her—caught her in his arms, and cried—

"Isabel! you love me—you love me!—You are mine!—nothing shall part us—you love me—at last you love me!"

His action and his tone were more fierce than tender—accusing towards her—triumphant in knowledge of his own power.

He felt her heart beat wildly against his breast. She did not struggle to be free, but looked him in the face and said—

"I love you!—It is true!—I love you!"

If her pride were good for aught, should it not then have smitten him and freed her?—when he, the betrothed of another, put his arms round her, claimed her as his own, *accusing* her of loving him! Had he come humble and pleading, she would have scorned and repelled him. Now he had taken her by storm, his passion had made her poor pride quail! Honour—her friend's peace—everything but love, passionate delight—were forgotten.

What would become of her who had prayed in spirit—"Lead me into temptation, that I may deliver myself from evil!" Here was the temptation—where the deliverance?

"God have pity upon us!" were Mr. Long's next words.

He released Isabel, and walked a few steps from her.

"You scorn me! you scorn me!" Isabel lifted up her head only to let it fall again upon her knees, and to break again into a passionate wail—"Lost, lost, lost!" her familiar fiend was crying in her ear.

Mr. Long came near her again, knelt down by her, taking her hand. His manner was subdued and gentle now.

"Isabel," he said, "nothing should keep us apart now—nothing must keep us apart. She, Clara, would be the last to wish it. I have wronged her deeply, poor child! for I have never ceased loving you. I know that now—thank God, not quite too late."

She did not look up nor answer. He went on—

"We will be happy—though some penitence and humiliation must mix with our happiness. If Isabel loves me, I cannot but be happy. God keep me humble, for I have sinned and do not deserve this happiness!—We must pray her pardon—she will give it us—the good child!—Isabel, look up, love!—speak again; say that you forgive my fickleness—that ——"

Isabel rose and stood before him quite erect. The moon shone full upon her face—upon her white haggard face and eyes of despair.

"Of what do you talk to me—of forgiveness, humiliation, happiness? It is true, I love you; but, Reginald Long, I *swear* I will never marry you. I trust you—you will not betray me. Nothing shall be changed. Clara *shall* know nothing—I dare you to tell her!—I would kill myself if you did. I will not live to be pitied and pardoned—to be humble and happy!"

"Isabel, for God's sake stay. We have both erred—I especially—but it rests with ourselves whether we have erred fatally. There is yet time. Clara's gentle nature ——"

"I swear I will never marry you. If you betray anything of this I will die! I am humiliated in my own eyes—in yours: further I will not bear. You hear me!"

"I hear; but I cannot be so answered. I will not."

"All the years that you have known me, till these last few moments, have I ever given you reason to think me wanting in determination—self-respect?"

"Never! but now you have said that you love me, you cannot take back those words."

"I have loved you ever since I first knew you, almost. But I think it is a little step from such love as mine to hate. Thwart me now, and I feel that I shall hate you."

"Isabel, only hear me, the voice of your goodness, your happiness ——"

"I will *not* hear you—I will not! no! I have spoken what I mean to adhere to; if it costs life, it will not cost honour. You shall marry Clara and forget me. You *can* forget! After the marriage I will not see you again till I am a wife myself. Mock me with no more talk of penitence and happiness. You mistake me quite."

"A wife yourself!" He caught and echoed those words.

"I will marry, but never you—not if Clara died to-morrow. Once I said I would never marry out of my station. Now I say I will grasp any power that will help me to revenge myself on the world!"

"Wretched girl!"

"*You* scorn me?" she asked with intense passion.

"No, Isabel, no. What can I do or say?"

"Nothing! Yes—just this—tell Clara I am ill, gone to my room: I am going. You must leave early to-morrow. When you come here to marry Clara, I shall be quite well again, quite well again."

Isabel crept into the wood behind her! he sprang after her, caught her wet dress, trying to detain her; she pulled it violently from his grasp.

"Go, do not insult me, because I am miserable and weak. Go!" she repeated in that imperious tone which he dared not disobey.

Deeper into the wet wood went Isabel.

Mr. Long walked in an opposite direction—walked as a sleep-walker, or one stupefied. 'God help us all!" was his first ejaculation; he spoke fervently, heeding the solemn words: "God help that proud and miserable girl, for I cannot!" Bitter thoughts followed—of remorse, self-contempt, doubt—even fear.

At last he went to the house—into the bright, warm drawing-room, where Clara sat behind the tea-urn, and Mr. Blanchard still dozed by the fire; where the tame comfortable aspect of everything cruelly mocked the miserable passion he had just gone through.

"Ah! you are come at last! I am afraid you will have cold tea," Clara exclaimed, and then busied herself with pouring it out.

Mr. Long sat down on the sofa behind her, taking up that paper again.

"Is Isabel changing her dress?" Clara enquired. "I am am afraid she must have got very damp!"

"Has Miss Wold been out after that heavy rain?" Mr. Blanchard asked, rousing himself to come to the tea-table. "Very imprudent of her, very imprudent indeed!"

"Miss Wold has gone to her room ill, and will not come down again to-night!" Mr. Long said in a measured voice, adding: "What a glare of light you have; may I dispense with some?" He subdued it greatly.

"Isabel ill? then I must go to her."

Clara rose hastily. Mr. Long put his hand upon her arm.

"Do not go! I know something of these attacks to which your friend is subject. She is not fit to see anybody. Absolute quiet is all that is needed. Send her some hot tea by Mrs. Farr."

Mr. Long spoke with quiet authority, and Clara sat down again, prepared to obey. No doubt crossed her mind; she had never doubted these two—Reginald or Isabel.

Her utter innocence and childlike confidence saved her now—perhaps saved others also.

Just then the door opened, and Isabel came in to give the lie to Reginald's words. She had changed her wet clothes, and carefully arranged her hair. She wore a dress of rich, dark-coloured silk; she could not but look pale, and round her eyes were dark rings; but she seemed perfectly composed, calm, queenly.

"I felt better, and thought some tea would quite cure me; so I came down," she explained in answer to Clara's enquiries; and took the easy-chair by the fire that Mr. Blanchard offered her, turning her face a little from the light; she felt as if it must show traces of past storm.

Mr. Blanchard was very attentive! he put her a stool for her feet, and a little table to set her cup upon; and Clara made some fresh tea.

Reginald Long stooped his head lower, was more intent upon his paper. His heart died within him; if he had had any hope from further passionate appeal to Isabel, he lost it now. Her pride and resolution were indomitable, or her love for him was a vague fancy—was nothing. "I love you! It is

true! I love you!" His heart echoed her words; but his reason told him they were spoken out of a perfectly despairing and suicidal love.

Exquisitely beautiful she looked in her listless grace—one slight hand hanging languidly over the arm of the crimson-cushioned chair; the other, with more purpose in it, pressed against her heart, each irregular beat of which was pain; her head was thrown back, and rested against her chair, the fire-light playing upon the white throat.

"Reginald, will you please give this to Isabel?" Clara said, holding a full cup towards him. "Have you a steady hand? take care!"

Mr. Long took the cup and approached Isabel, intently looking at what he carried. She held out a steady hand: but his touched her soft fingers, and their eyes met, full of guilty consciousness. Between them the cup fell to the ground, and the tea was poured out on Isabel's dress.

The little bustle consequent thereon, the sponging of the silk, and Clara's lamentations over it, were felt as a relief. When this was over, when Isabel had been supplied afresh, and the tea equipage removed, it was late, past ten o'clock.

It was only needful for Isabel to appear to listen attentively to Mr. Blanchard's conversation for about half-an-hour; then Clara proposed retiring.

Isabel bid Clara good-night at the head of the stairs, refusing all her offered tendernesses gently but decidedly.

Then she locked herself up with her own thoughts, as her only companions through the long, light summer night. And once more she longed for darkness, any darkness, the darkness of annihilation—death—with a longing not to be uttered.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

ON the twenty-eighth of June, Percy and Greville, Walter and Henry, Rose and Ellen Blanchard, with Mrs. Ratford, Mr. Long and his aunt, and a few more wedding-guests, arrived at Burton Lacey.

The wedding was to be on the next day, and all was bustle and gaiety. The bridesmaids were somewhat ill-assorted as to age. Rose and Ellen, a pretty youthful pair, and Miss Long and Isabel were the four; it was to be a tolerably quiet wedding.

Mr. Long was grave and thoughtful; but very tenderly attentive to Clara, and neither sad nor moody-looking.

Of the sleepless nights and perplexed days that had intervened between his leaving Burton Lacey and his return to it, there was little trace on his countenance. He followed where he believed that duty led him, felt God's blessing upon him, and had faith in the working together of all things for good. Whether he were right or wrong, positively, mattered not; he acted upon a conscientious conviction—that was enough. He had the belief of well-doing to support him.

Clara's happiness was in his keeping—well he knew that Isabel's was not; so she had *sworn*—she was not to be doubted. So when he had at last succeeded in being deaf to the voice of passion, he did not find the course to be taken difficult of decision. He looked back upon that scene on the terrace as on a wild, bad dream. A good man, when he has ceased to esteem a woman, will not long continue to love her: besides, Reginald was no longer young, and now desired peace, not passion.

Nothing in Isabel's manner awoke in him any doubt. She showed no sign! She had been laid up in the interval from the effects of imprudent exposure to damp, as Mr. Blanchard said. Now she was the life of the house, both on the evening before, and on the morning of the marriage. Percy

Blanchard was her most devoted slave, and received some marks of favour. She carefully avoided the sharply-vigilant Miss Long.

The wedding and wedding-breakfast over, Reginald and Clara gone, Isabel shut herself into her room; she had been so busy, that she required some rest before the ball in the evening, she said. Mr. Blanchard expressed benignant approval of her intention, though Mr. Percy murmured, and said it would be deucedly dull till she should show the light of her countenance again, and asked if she could not rest on the couch in the drawing-room, or under the trees at the end of the terrace; she shook her head, smiled gaily, and went away.

"That is over?" said another Isabel than that bright-smiling one, sitting before her glass. "The only man you will ever love is utterly, eternally out of your reach. Yes! great eyes, open wide to take in the whole aspect of your misery. Misery? No; I am young and beautiful; I will have life and power—not only misery and death! I am sick and weary now, but I shall not be so always."

She threw herself on the bed; it was early afternoon. There she lay, till the sun growing low in the heavens, glanced in, and shone right upon her face. Then, with a fretful, childish complaint against the disturbing, intrusive light, she rose and looked at her watch. It was eight o'clock in the evening, quite time to dress; but she had not the power to get up, she found. Remembering that she had scarcely tasted anything through that long day, which had began so early—she rang and ordered some coffee.

Mrs. Farr herself brought it up; glad to have an opportunity of speaking to Miss Wold about her young lady, and of having a little cry, with some one by to see the tears.

So Isabel sat up on the bed and sipped the strong, hot coffee, and listened to Mrs. Farr: there was no need to speak.

She rose wonderfully refreshed.

There was a stir to receive her, and a murmur of admiration when she entered the drawing-room with a bright flush on her face, and an excited light sparkling in her eyes.

"How nice you look!—what a pity Clara and Reginald can't see you!" the young people exclaimed.

"What a beautiful Spanish-looking dress! That shade of pink, subdued by the lace, is most bewitching!" Miss Long said; then her eyes scrutinised Isabel's face, and she turned from her abruptly.

"I began to despair—thought you meant to enact the sleeping beauty!" Mr. Percy observed.

"Well! have I not a right to be tired? You gentlemen cannot imagine the fuss and trouble a wedding brings; the many things that have to be thought of—the arranging, packing."

Isabel coloured resentfully at the sharp look Miss Long directed towards her. Miss Long had hardly ceased watching Isabel, ever since she arrived.

"Where is your father, Mr. Percy?" Isabel asked.

"He has not reappeared yet! He went to rest, as you did."

"I think you had better go and look for him; he seemed much overcome this morning."

"Proud to obey any commands it may please you to lay upon me," Percy replied with a low bow, and left the room; but Greville had anticipated him, and came in with the old man leaning upon his arm.

Guests began to arrive; the Darralls, Raveys, Mostyns, all the neighbouring families from within a wide-sweeping circuit. This grand entertainment was given to please Percy.

The flush on Isabel's face, a crimson spot on each other—where white cheeks heightened. Her eyes grew brighter.

She was beyond all dispute more beautiful than any other woman in the room; and she knew it. Mr. Percy Blanchard danced the first dance with her; afterwards she was the belle of the night, and by no means indifferent to being so. She loved power of any and every kind.

Isabel was Miss Wold of Wrangham Manor House now, and an heiress; she carried all before her, for this one evening, spite of the additional information which the Raveys and Darralls imparted, in strict confidence, to every one to whom they spoke. The gentlemen discovered that she was as wise and witty as she was beautiful, and every other woman in the room felt eclipsed.

Isabel had in her mind this:—"When I was known only as the daughter of the hosier, I was as beautiful, as clever—more good—more pure-hearted and simple-minded than I am now. *Then* most of these men would have passed me by with a negligent whisper of commendation of my good looks to one another, meant more as an insult than a compliment. To-day ——" she laughed at the contrast, sharply, bitterly.

Only fot Greville had she soft answers and gentle looks; others felt a subtly-hidden sting in many a demure reply, a sting pointed by a glance belying the demureness of tone in which she spoke.

The night wore away. Isabel's flush began to fade, the excitement to fail, the sense of triumph to pall. In *one* night! Lay that to heart, Isabel!

As she sat in a low, lounging chair, near one of the windows, her pearly-white shoulders relieved against the dark velvet, Mr. Percy Blanchard leaning over her, talked to her eagerly; about what Isabel had no idea, or she might not have sat so.

With down-looking eyes, and fingers playing among the flowers of the bouquet lying in her lap, she listened intently to a conversation carried on near her, between two people standing in the recess of a window, who were hidden by a curtain.

"Yes, she certainly is handsome, after a certain fashion," a feminine voice said,—Isabel recognised that of her old schoolfriend Julia Darrall. "But she is so very haughty and supercilious-looking—looks as if she thought every one beneath her. And what has she to be proud of?—a tradesman's daughter!—a mere shopkeeper's daughter! I wonder at Mr. Blanchard's having *her* here, and asking *us!*"

A male voice grumbled something indistinct, then the other resumed—

"Yes, it is quite true. Her father was a hosier in Caiston. We girls always made a point of going to his shop for our gloves, because Isabel didn't like it; and we thought it right to pull down her pride as much as we could. Her father has retired from business, and has had money left him; but still they are quite low people."

Some more half-heard words, then Julia continued—

"No, I don't know that she does *look* vulgar. She has taken immense trouble to get well-educated—used to be a perfect slave to her masters. But I think she has overdone the thing—there is a something that betrays her. I haven't half her self-possession. Then she is a terrible flirt!—just after she left school, she began to practise on Reginald Long—she kept him dangling for years. Every one thought he was caught; and all the neighbourhood was lamenting his making such a low match: but he managed to escape, you see!"

"Oh, Clara was such a simple little thing; and Isabel

Wold is very deep," Miss Darrall returned, in answer to some expression of wonder that the two rivals had continued on such good terms. "Do you know she actually brought her brother (who served in the shop!) to Burton Lacey once, and tried to get up a match between him and Clara. But Mr. Blanchard wouldn't stand *that*. Now that Mr. Long has given her the slip, she is evidently trying to secure Percy Blanchard. The father looks old and feeble. Percy will be a good 'parti,' though the family is somewhat large."

"By Jove! I wish that were in some sort true, Miss Wold; then no Julia Darrall, or Julia anyone, should dare speak of you so!"

Percy had started up, looking daggers at the curtain. There was unmistakeable earnest beneath his assumed gallantry. Isabel laughed lightly.

Isabel's companion had discovered that she was not attending to him; she had given him a sign to be quiet; and they had both been listening to the latter part of Julia Darrall's speech.

Percy's eyes said a good deal as they were fixed full on Isabel's listening face. Then he drew back the curtain which concealed the speakers suddenly, muttering that the room was hot. He and Miss Wold were going to dance together again. So there he stood, with her on his arm, and confronted Miss Darrall and her companion.

"It has only been a verification of the old proverb about listeners," Isabel said carelessly to Percy, adding, "I suppose you have been admiring the stars, Miss Darrall!"

Miss Darrall looked eminently confused — encountering Percy's fierce and Isabel's coolly-sarcastic glance, and slipped away. Her companion, recovering himself with difficulty, very humbly supplicated the honour of an introduction to Miss Wold, and her hand for the next dance, for which Julia had intended to secure him.

Miss Wold was engaged for the rest of the night; but told him so in a softly-gracious tone, and answered the few remarks he found time to proffer in so sweet and courteous a manner, that he could only believe that either she had not heard the conversation, or that she was a most perfect lady—possessing, in the highest degree, the art of setting every one at their ease, which is the test of true ladyhood.

In the east the sky was red, and the early birds were stirring and chirping, when Isabel entered her room, and threw open her window.

How different was the white-robed, white-faced Isabel, who paced the room in the morning light—the bitterness of Julia Darrall's words rankling unchecked in her proud heart—to the sparkling beauty of the ball-room!

How difficult it was for her now to comprehend why she had refused Reginald's free hand. How grand it would have been, and how unutterably happy to be his wife—so gratifying and satisfying her love and ambition at once.

The reasons that had before seemed such weighty, well-fleshed realities, now appeared but as empty chaff—dry dust. So self-respecting counsel, born of human pride, confounds itself, and is brought to worse than nought; while the simple folly (as the world counts it) of true love, in any guise, is wisdom which exalts and shall be exalted.

That night Isabel knew herself a fool, and named her past pride folly and wickedness. But it was too late to turn back now—the road behind was utterly desolate and dreary.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FAIR UNDERSTANDING.

BOTH Miss Wold and Miss Long stayed some time at Burton Lacey. Miss Long was to remain till it was time that she should go to Moor Hall, to prepare for the reception of her nephew and his wife.

Universal entreaties detained Isabel; yet more her own dread of the quiet and solitude of Wrangham Farm, which dread was greater than even her longing for such quiet and solitude: she did not think she could bear its loneliness, or her father's affectionate and Miss Erlridge's searching looks yet—not quite yet.

One morning, by a rare chance, Isabel and Miss Long were alone, sitting in the garden—not on the lower terrace—Isabel shunned that. She had generally very carefully shunned any tête-à-tête with Reginald's aunt, fearing reminiscences of those happy days at Moor Hall, and—she hardly knew what, besides.

Isabel had a book on her knee now. Miss Long was meditating over a letter from Clara which she had received that morning and had just read over for the second or third time.

Miss Long's decided voice presently broke the sultry noon silence so sharply as to make Isabel start.

"Clara should have written to you, Isabel, but I believe she was afraid."

"Does her letter concern me, then?" A wild fear went through Isabel's heart — only a momentary pang. "He would not now betray me, and hurt Clara," she thought.

"Yes, read it!"

Isabel took the letter, avoiding Miss Long's eyes, read it, and returned it without speaking.

"You see, poor Clara is perplexed," Miss Long said.

"Yes, she appears to be so; unnecessarily, I think."

"Percy has apparently been soliciting her influence in his

favour, and her sisterly heart is moved. Reginald has bidden her not favour Percy's suit, and her wifely obedience is touched. I think her letter, giving both views of the question, counsel on either side, a very ingenious compromise."

"Yes, she was evidently perplexed."

"And what say you?"

"To what, Miss Long?"

"To the case of which you have heard both sides."

"That I do not see what Clara's husband has to do with my affairs; that it is natural for Percy's sister to plead for Percy; but that neither pleading nor opposition will make any difference at all."

"Most wisely answered. All Reginald has to do with it is this:—he knows a good deal of Percy Blanchard; he thinks Percy Blanchard has not the power of making his friend, Isabel Wold happy; so he thinks that Isabel Wold must not marry Percy Blanchard."

"*Must* not!"

"Ay! must not. Marriage without love is a crime, and, like all crime, produces misery."

"Percy appears to think that I can make him happy," Isabel commented with affected and perverse lightness.

"But you—you cannot do without happiness, Isabel Wold! Yours is no passionless nature. Don't talk of Percy Blanchard! Consider yourself!"

"I have done with happiness!" Isabel said. Disguises vanished as she and Mary Long looked into each other's eyes. Isabel felt brought to bay and reckless.

Miss Long remained silent a good while. Then she drew nearer Isabel, took a passive hand, and said—

"I enrol myself among Percy Blanchard's opponents. He could not make you happy. Wait—perhaps some one is to meet you who could. You are a young creature to say that you have done with happiness. You have not, unless you throw away all possibility of it. Live single and die single, rather than marry without love. It is folly to suppose that you can even, so, make any man happy. A husband cannot be made happy by a wife who does not love him. Indifference is impossible between man and wife. It is love, or its opposite, especially with such a nature as yours."

"I have heard all this before," Isabel answered, wearily, and withdrew her hand. "Look there," she said, after a few minutes' silence, as Percy came in sight, hastening towards her with a face full of love and eagerness.

"I have bought such a horse for you to ride!" he exclaimed, and threw himself down on the turf at Isabel's feet. "You must try it as soon as it gets cool!"

"I do not think it will get cool to-day!" she answered, languidly, "and I am not inclined to ride."

"No! the nights are more sultry than the days, I think!" Miss Long said, with a glance at the unclouded July heaven.

"There is coolness enough in your tone at least," Mr. Percy muttered for Isabel's hearing.

Miss Long kept her post close to Isabel resolutely, though she knew that Percy was wishing her—anywhere else, more sincerely than courteously.

Isabel closed her book and began to work at a bit of delicate embroidery with very listless, slow-moving fingers. Percy, extended on the turf, supporting his head on his arm, watched her and seemed to find that sufficient occupation, though she did not favour him with one glance at any of the pauses, to thread a needle or use her scissors, when he hoped for one.

"Suppose Mr. Percy reads to us, Isabel, some of those poems you have been praising."

Miss Long's proposition was not without malicious intent.

"Certainly, if Miss Wold wishes," Percy replied with alacrity.

"I do not mind." Isabel let him take the book from her lap.

"Now he will thoroughly disgust her!" thought Miss Long, "for I don't suppose he can read poetry any better than—a ploughman."

Wise Miss Long was mistaken for once. True feeling confers dignity and power. Percy's love was true in its own little way.

Percy chose for himself a poem that he thought expressed somewhat of his own emotions. He read in a simple, manly wise, evidently identifying himself with what he read, and making the poetry express his deepest self, and he had a pleasant voice. Miss Long fidgetted. Isabel listened intently—her work dropped from her fingers—her eyes looking far away. She was thinking of no one so little as of the reader. The words made her heart quiver.

Percy did not speak when he had finished—so did not break the charm of the last words, which he had read very softly.

Isabel was the first to interrupt the silence by complaining of the oppressive heat, and saying that she thought they should find the north side of the house far cooler than it was out-doors.

She rose, looking very pale, and went towards the house, leaving Miss Long to follow if she pleased, and letting Percy carry her discarded shawl, her book, and her work-case. When she reached the house, she went straight to her own room, without bestowing a word or a glance upon her devoted attendant. Percy looked after her wistfully; as she went slowly up the broad staircase, he stood in the hall and watched her out of sight. Then he deposited her book and work in the drawing-room and stayed there, whistling softly and reflectively. Apparently a bright thought came to him as he mused; for soon after he mounted his horse, to ride along the broiling high-road for the second time that day. Now he was going to procure for Isabel more choice flowers than the green-houses of Burton Lacey yielded—flowers to be worn at a fête, to which they were going that afternoon, at Alderton Park.

Isabel was not pleased to re-appear till the time appointed for starting. Mr. Blanchard did not dine at home– so her capricious conduct escaped his remark. She said it was too hot to eat, and did not appear in the dining-room.

"You wish to get a brain-fever, one would suppose, Mr. Percy," she remarked, when he presented her with the flowers, not concealing how long a distance he had ridden to procure them.

"Indeed they are very beautiful!" she added, graciously glancing at him over them, as she raised them to her face. She blushed a little, meeting grave Greville's eyes.

That night the "world" of Darralls, Raveys, Mostyns, and so on, had an opportunity of seeing how completely Mr. Percy Blanchard—who had gained the reputation of being difficult and fastidious--was "caught" by the beautiful Miss Wold.

"Poor fellow!" he was "very far gone," they said; for he took little care to appear anything but what he was—a young man most deeply and desperately in love. Isabel herself was denounced as a stony-hearted coquette, a designing woman, an ambitious creature, an accomplished actress. These, and similar epithets, were lavished upon her by Julia Darrall, Jane Ravey, and one or two other young ladies of congenial dispositions, who also discovered that she was

growing very thin and old-looking—would soon be quite plain, as she was losing her complexion, which they opined had been her chief beauty.

Nothing troubled Isabel save Miss Long's at once pitiless and compassionate observance: she heard a good many of the remarks made, and guessed that other and harder ones were uttered; but she had a strong consciousness of power, which kept these things from troubling her.

A few days after this fête, she announced her intention of going home on the next day. At the same time she told Mr. Blanchard that she wished to speak to him for a few moments alone.

Mr. Blanchard looked nervous as he led the way to his study. He was most ceremoniously polite, and offered the arm-chair which he had occupied when, some years since, he and Isabel held a parley in that room, to his guest. They both remembered that day vividly. The remembrance gave Isabel a more haughty, Mr. Blanchard a more weak and irresolute expression than usual.

"I shall not sit down—I will not occupy you for many minutes," Isabel said.

Yet it was a little while before she spoke. She stood by the table, leaning slightly on the chair he had placed her, considering. During that time Mr. Blanchard seemed very uneasy. He moved one book after another, of those that lay near him, as if searching for what he could not find. He started when Isabel began abruptly,—

"Your son tells me that he desires to make me his wife, Mr. Blanchard."

"He has not been able to keep his attachment a secret to me, even if he desired to do so; and indeed, Miss Wold—" Mr. Blanchard spoke, smiling benignly.

"Excuse me a moment, Mr. Blanchard. I want to ask you a question. If I should ever enter your family, how will you regard my entrance?"

"As—as an honour—a great honour, I assure you."

"But I am a shopkeeper's daughter, Mr. Blanchard—and sister to the young tradesman to whom you refused Clara."

"It is different, quite different, Miss Wold!" Mr. Blanchard answered, successfully assuming an air of dignity. "A wife takes her position from her husband. My daughter would have been a tradesman's wife—my son's wife will be my son's wife—Mrs. Percy Blanchard, of Burton Lacey. And, Miss Wold, though some painful circumstances

attach to the recollection of—of the past—though unhappily, and yet naturally, you could not then regard the affair in the same light in which I saw it—yet, as far as I can see, I have every reason to rejoice in the firmness of my conduct on that—that painful occasion. I trust that we may now dismiss the remembrance of all that past between us then."

"As far as you can see—yes!" Isabel repeated thoughtfully. "But you see a very little way, and very dimly."

Mr. Blanchard's eyes roamed restlessly over the table, having met some passionate expression in Isabel's that he could not understand and dreaded.

"Then I am to believe that I should meet with something beyond toleration, if I consented to enter this family?" Isabel demanded after a pause.

"Most certainly. I have been anxious to do anything that lay in my power to second my son's suit. But I have not ventured—you keep us all at a great distance, Miss Wold, or you would not have had need to seek this interview. I shall hope that a more intimate and friendly relation may soon be established; that I may have the pleasure of seeing you fill the place of the daughter I have lost. I feel assured that you can fill her place very worthily."

"I do not know, Mr. Blanchard. I shall not make so important a decision hastily. I wished clearly to understand your views—I do not mean to enter this or any other family on sufferance.

"May I write to your father? to satisfy him with regard to the position which you will take among us."

"No! that would be premature. I do not love your son."

"My dear young lady, I believe Percy's peace and happiness are completely in your keeping. I entreat that you will not trifle with his affections."

"I am not in the habit of trifling, Mr. Blanchard."

"I beg your pardon for the unguarded expression. I cannot but feel anxious about my son. The well-being and the honour of the family are in a measure, in your hands. I will not conceal from you that Percy has been unsettled, and —and extravagant, that for years his habits were unsatisfactory. Now he seems inclined to settle; but—if he should meet with—with such a disappointment as you have it in your power to inflict, the consequences might be most—most distressing! If you would empower me to tell my son that you favour his suit,—I do not know anyone, Miss Wold,

to whom I would sooner give my son—I mean—you understand. He is not a strong character, and ——"

"I spoke the truth when I said I did not love him—he must wait. Meanwhile I thank you for your opinion of my capability of managing him."

"You will allow him to visit you?" Mr. Blanchard asked, unheeding Isabel's bitterness of emphasis.

"Yes! I will not occupy you any longer, Mr. Blanchard. But I must tell you," she said, looking at Mr. Blanchard steadily, "that the person you are ready to receive into your family with honour, is not half so deserving, so noble, true, and loving, as the one you formerly rejected. Though you are well content with that decision, I cannot count my brother's suffering for nothing."

So ended that strange interview.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ISABEL AND PERCY ARE ENGAGED.

"YOU have been at home a month, your father tells me; and all that time you did not come to see me! This is not like the Isbel of old times," said Mr. Erlridge with gentle reproach.

"I hardly think I have been awake since I came home," Isabel answered, as she received Miss Erlridge's kiss

"You feel dull after the gaiety of Burton Lacey. I suppose it was gay there?"

"Oh! very gay; and this house does seem desperately quiet."

"What have you been doing to-day? I do not see any signs of occupation about."

"I really do not know what I have been doing," Isabel said, glancing round the drawing-room.

"You had better apply to some of your favourite studies again."

"What is the use? I am tired of being studious!" Isabel said pettishly. "I do not see that one is any the happier for being more learned and cultivated than people with whom one lives. To be easily pleased, easily amused, easily satisfied, that must be the happier way.

Miss Erlridge smiled slightly and sadly.

"Yes," Isabel answered; "I remember you told me something of the kind once. I remember what I answered, how I thought then—I was young and foolish.

"And now?"

"Now, of course, I am less romantic, more practical. But I do not know that I was wrong. I do not know—I'm sure—anything!"

"I met Mr. Percy Blanchard in town to-day, and he was most polite to me," Miss Erlridge said presently.

"He is much improved," Isabel answered seriously.

"He has taken up his quarters in Caiston for the present."

"Burton Lacey is dull now that you have left it, perhaps?"

"Yes—so he says. I want to know how Rose and Ellen get on—how you like them? I must have them here on Saturday, and will send them back on Monday. What sort of girls do you find them?"

"Rose is like Clara in disposition, very sweet and tractable; Ellen has more spirit, but is a good child. Have you heard from Clara lately?"

"I heard this morning; they will be 'at home' at Moor Hall in a few days. Clara is full of dread at the idea of receiving visitors, and of sorrow that I refused to be there to help her; but she says she is very happy."

Then followed a pause. Miss Erlridge was not at her ease with Isabel; she felt some change without knowing what. A thousand questions that she would have liked to ask about Isabel's stay at Burton Lacey, she dared not put.

"I suppose papa told you that Leigh is coming home this winter?" Isabel said, without any show of gladness or animation.

"Yes! I was glad to hear it; it will be pleasant for you. You will have some of your old musical evenings."

"No! I cannot care for music so much as I did, and it does me harm."

"Isabel! I think you are morally asleep, and want rousing. Shall I administer a moral shaking?"

"You had better not! It would not be safe to rouse me!" Isabel answered with a sudden defiance in her tone.

"You wish to have Rose and Ellen here on Saturday?" Miss Erlridge said, as she rose to go.

"Yes. I suppose they will not want much amusing; their brother will be here, and I promised to have them now and then."

"It will be a treat to them to be in the country—but if they did want amusing, you would have leisure to attend to them. I do not see what you have to occupy you, my dear!"

"I want amusing myself. I am spoilt for such quiet, country life as ours."

"I used to be told that a woman who was not content with quiet and country, was not good for much anywhere," Miss Erlridge said, smiling.

"Very likely it was true!" Isabel answered.

She accompanied Miss Erlridge down-stairs and to the little side garden-gate as usual. Then she stood leaning against the gate, and looking over it, long after Miss Erlridge was out of sight. Her hands clasping the top of one of its rustic bars, her chin resting on them, and her eyes full of gloom, she watched the great, red sun disappear.

"I will be fickle in nothing!" she said that night as she looked into those eyes. "I have had one love; that is over, absolutely; and it has changed me so that I cannot bear the old way of life. I will form one engagement of marriage, and fulfil it honourably; I cannot draw back, and have people triumph over my defeat!"

There was nothing of the old passionate tone in these self-confidencies: they were moody mutterings, that seemed heedful of something not to be roused.

"I do not see much of you now, daughter!" Mr. Wold remarked, when Isabel, next morning, came down after he had breakfasted, just as he was going to drive into Caiston to attend one of the many meetings of one of the many committees to which he belonged.

"No, papa. You are so busy, and I am so idle!"

"And why are you so idle? Do you not sleep well, that you get up so late?"

"I sleep all night; I do not seem as if I were ever quite awake."

"Did you keep such bad hours while you were at Burton Lacey? You learned to enact the fine lady there, my dear, I think.

"I believe we were always late—but it cannot be that; I have been home so long."

"I fear you find your home dull; but you must try and rouse yourself, and find interest in your old occupations; you do not seem to find your father's society enough to amuse you now, Isabel. We must talk over this matter, my love! I will do anything I can to make you happy, bnt I cannot be content that my Isabel should sink into a listless fine lady—a Lydia Languish! There is work enough in the world for women to do:—not one should be idle—some day soon, I shall bring home that Mrs. Smith, who is so interested in all our schools, to talk to you. Yes, child, I will lay vigorous siege to this languid indifference of yours."

Isabel remained silent.

"I want to speak to you about another matter, but I must

not stay now ; this evening I will come home early, and we will walk out together."

"Nay ! not so," thought Isabel.

Isabel had but just sent away her hardly tasted breakfast, when Mr. Blanchard was announced. He was welcome, she was so dull; his reception was a shade warmer than usual. On that he presumed : his vehemence and eagerness roused Isabel a little—his undoubted earnestness touched her heart a little, enough to quicken its beating. He pleaded his cause desperately—he had a right to demand her decision. Almost before she knew what she had said, she found him on his knees before her, fitting a ring upon the hand he had taken, kissing it and raptuorously thanking her.

"What have I said ?" she asked.

"That you will be my wife."

"*Not* that I loved you ! remember that ! Never dare accuse me of falsehood, if some day you find I cannot love you, and I do not think I can."

"You can—you will—my love and my submission ——"

"Do you remember how pleasant you thought it would be to have a beautiful creature devoted to one ?" asked Isabel.

"Yes ! but I am quite content to give instead of to receive devotion, now and always."

"Go now !" Isabel commanded presently. "Your ring shall stay on my finger, and you may come again at six to dine here ; do not come earlier ; you are not to speak to my father, I shall do that myself !"

He prepared to obey her, after reasonable delay. He wanted some of her hair to put in a ring he was having made for himself, and he begged for it. She hesitated, then said,—

"You have a right to it, I suppose."

Pulling down some of her shining tresses she told him to take what he liked, giving him her scissors. He cut off a little lock, with a hand trembling with reverent eagerness.

"Wouldn't you like my hair in something ?" he asked with boyish hesitation.

"It is childish nonsense ; but if you like ! Give me those scissors," said Isabel.

He knelt down, his forehead lightly touching her knee, and she severed one curl from the handsome head.

"A very pretty scene truly ! You should not place yourself just opposite a looking-glass to enact such," Miss Long exclaimed :—she had chosen to walk up-stairs before the

servant could announce her, and had seen Isabel and Percy reflected in a mirror hanging close to the open door.

"I am here on my way to Moor Hall," she explained, taking the seat that Isabel offered her.

Percy took his departure, inwardly abusing Miss Long. Isabel seemed quite unembarrassed.

"I am too late, I see," Miss Long said, when she and Isabel were left alone.

"Just in time rather—to wish me hap—to offer your congratulations. I am engaged to Mr. Percy Blanchard."

"So I imagined," Miss Long answered sharply. "I wish you well, Isabel Wold, I wish you well!"

"Thank you, Miss Long; I will try to deserve all sincere good wishes by doing my duty," she answered with more natural warmth in her manner than it had had for weeks.

"Percy is a good-hearted fellow, though he and I always quarrel," Miss Long added. "He'll make a good husband if you let him!"

"If I let him?"

"If you encourage him—humour him—love him!"

"That is what you mean?"

"Yes!"

"I shall be honest with him; he shall know, he does know, how much, how little rather, to expect. He shall never be able to reproach me with having deceived him."

"Is this news to go down to Moor Hall?" asked Miss Long.

"It is no secret—Percy cannot keep a secret. All the world may know it; I am not ashamed, nor is he."

"As I said before, it is too late to do anything but wish you well. I do not understand you, Isabel Wold. Percy Blanchard is not the husband I looked to see you take, any more than Clara Blanchard is the wife I expected my Reginald to bring home. But I do not understand you, Isabel Wold, and God keep me from judging you. For your mother's sake I shall always wish you well."

Isabel turned white, shaken by a sudden wind of passion. She kept silence, and it passed over.

Miss Long only remained a short time, her carriage was waiting at the door; she had a great deal of shopping to do in Caiston, she said, and should not get down to Moor Hall till late at night, as it was.

When she left, Isabel went out, walked some miles not heeding where, and only came home just in time to dress

for dinner. Percy and her father were in the room together when she entered it. Dinner passed off pretty well.

Isabel felt it an intrusion when Percy followed her into the garden, where she went, instead of sitting in the drawing-room, during the twilight hour after dinner.

"You must not always follow me about like a spaniel," she told him, but smiled the while, though not kindly.

"I want to know where your ring is?" he asked, eagerly.

"Here, where I said it would stay, only I turned the stones inside, that their glitter should not attract my father's attention till I have told him of my engagement. You must not be suspicious, Percy, or I shall soon tire of you. You are answered—go—I shall come into the drawing-room presently; now I do not wish to be disturbed. Remember I am not the beautiful and devoted creature, nor am I likely ever to be devoted. My temper is not always good—it is well that you should know that at once."

He obeyed her. Afterwards she sat down on a seat near the gate opening upon the field-path that led to the wood.

Wolf leapt the gate and ran along the path, looking back to challenge her to follow him. But she sat stonily still, and soon he came and lay motionless at her feet. Wolf was used to intervals of neglect now.

The last daylight seemed to linger upon Isabel's face—which shone out palely from her dark hair, and the folds of black lace carelessly thrown over her head,—and upon the marble-white hands clasping her knee. She looked neither upward nor downward, but straight on; so she sat after the twilight had faded, and the evening and autumn mists had crept up from the river-side meadows, and fallen round her and upon her heavily.

Percy Blanchard stood pressing his brow against the window-pane, and strained his eyes, endeavouring to see her coming through the dusk. He gave strange answers to the remarks Mr. Wold addressed to him. Mr. Wold kept silence presently, and pondered gravely, looking into the fire. When Isabel, at last, came towards the house, she noticed the face at the window; her heart was a little touched by his love and submission; she was very kind to him that evening, playing only such music, singing only such songs as he liked and she did not care for, and letting him stand by and turn over the leaves for her. Her father read his paper, and took little notice of what went on. By-and-by Isabel and he sat opposite each other by the fire, alone. Percy had departed,

fretting at the simple good-night and hand-shake which he received from his betrothed. It must be done now, thought Isabel. She put her hand on her father's; it was so cold that it made him start. He laid down his book and looked at her gravely. Her left hand, on which she wore the ring Percy had given her, was the one with which she had touched him: she pointed to the ring, and said—

"Papa, I am engaged to Percy Blanchard. You are not surprised?" she went on hastily. "You knew why he was always here; you knew I should have sent him away before, unless I had meant to marry him. Or have you taken no notice of his frequent visits? I have always told you of them."

"I have not much noticed him. I am surprised—I did not think he could have pleased my daughter. It was concerning Percy Blanchard I meant to speak to you this evening."

"I am engaged to him, remember, papa," Isabel said, warningly.

"Right, Isabel—you will be a real wife.—My child, I have been deeply pained at your want of confidence in me—you have not been happy. That you should have taken this step without ——"

"Nay, I did not think you blind; I thought there was no occasion for me to say, 'Mr. Blanchard is courting me, papa.'"

"I have been to blame, perhaps.—Can this young man make you happy, Isabel?

"It is not in my nature to be happy; I have given up looking to be happy, and have wisely made up my mind to be content with human life such as I find it—imperfect, unsatisfying. You will like Percy, I hope, papa; everybody says that he is a good fellow, and he is very fond of me.—Poor Percy!" she muttered.

They were both silent, then she rose and touched his hand again.

"You are grave. You give me no blessing."

Isabel felt that she *must* have his blessing.

"God guide thee, guard thee, save thee!" Mr. Wold said fervently, taking her into his arms. "It is not thus I thought to part with my daughter. But I trust thee, child, to His keeping. I think I have paid too little heed to you lately, Isabel. Perhaps I am more than half to blame that there has been so little confidence between us."

"We are not going to part—not yet; we need not part at all. My husband shall always be glad to have my father as his guest."

Isabel was quite passive in her father's embrace, then glided away, just as he was about to question her—to own that he could not feel quite content with her choice.

"It is very strange, but my Isabel is too proud to marry for anything but love. She has feared I should not like him, and this has made her grave. The young man is handsome, amiable, and loves her. They say clever women often choose men who are not clever, but still I cannot understand it."

The next day Percy and his sisters, Rose and Ellen, came to Wrangham Farm together. The girls were full of delight at what they had heard—that Isabel would be their sister. Mr. Wold and Percy had a very long conversation; Percy's evident devotion made a favourable impression on the father; still he sighed often when he thought of the marriage.

From that day Isabel began to thaw; colour returned to her cheek and animation to her manner—she had determined to set herself to enjoy life. Percy gradually became necessary to her; his visits were more and more welcome; he filled up some of the emptiness of her life: his love, his mirth, his gifts, the rides and drives they had together, the amusements to which he took her—*now* he was proud to show his beautiful betrothed, proud of his own heroism, too, in having dared to choose a tradesman's daughter—had all these been suddenly removed, the blank would have been terrible. Despair and desperation must ensue from uninterrupted and unresigned introspection: this Isabel knew.

She began to feel grateful to Percy, negligently to like him. She could always send him away when she was tired of him; the lover was obedient. She forgot to think that the husband might be less submissive, more exacting. Yet she knew Percy to be selfish. When her heart reproached her for the ill return she could make him, she tried to satisfy herself by forming resolutions for the future; but generally had to give up this endeavour, because she could not think of Percy Blanchard as her husband—the master of her household, the constant companion of her life.

Isabel was not a woman who could be content to think ill of herself; so by dint of much straining, of much ignoring of what she knew to be true, and assumption of what she

felt to be fâlse, she was gradually convincing herself that she was not doing wrong, but acting rationally, "like a sensible woman." She was making a man who loved her happy, and securing for herself a position which she would fill with dignity and credit—in which she should feel at home, at ease, and should have much power of doing good.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DO NOT LOVE YOU."

THERE was to be a very grand musical Festival in the Caiston Cathedral. Percy Blanchard secured the best seats that were to be had for Isabella, her father, himself, Miss Erlridge, and his two young sisters. He felt himself quite sufficiently rewarded for a most extravagant outlay by Isabel's look of delight—her

"Thank you, Percy, especially for thinking of Miss Erlridge."

Of course Percy did not confess that Ellen had begged hard for a ticket for Miss Erlridge, and not successfully till she had used Isabel's name.

The day of the Festival came. Isabel was dressed well enough, and was looking well enough, to enrapture Percy.

"I need not have been anxious," he remarked, on seeing her. "I might have known that anything would look well on you."

"Of course you might," Isabel answered. "Once for all, accept that as an article of your creed respecting me, for you have been somewhat tiresome, Percy."

She smiled at him brightly, and he kissed her hand.

A sense of triumph, or, perhaps, more of fitness, of having found her proper level in society—whatever it was, an agreeable sensation, brightened Isabel's eyes and cheek, and made her heart beat more quickly as Percy led her to her seat.

They were rather late—the Cathedral was densely crowded. In reaching their own places, they disturbed the Darralls, Mostyns, Wilmots, and some others of the aristocrats of the neighbourhood.

Percy evidently enjoyed this, and was very fussy in settling Isabel and her party—securing for Isabel a seat at the end of a couch, for himself the place next her, so that no one else should claim her attention.

She accepted all his assiduities quietly—gracefully. She was fully conscious that many curious eyes were on her; this only made her look calm and a little haughty.

Three seats next Isabel were vacant. Percy speculated as whom they could be reserved for, and settled that it must be for Lord and Lady Orford and their daughter.

Isabel occupied herself in looking over the score of the oratorio—did not listen much to Percy's remarks on the dress and appearance of their neighbours. She did not look up as the three occupants of the places next hers arrived, till the ribbons of a lady's cloak, thrown across the back of a seat, happened to sweep across her page.

She raised her eyes then in acknowledgment of a gentleman's—"I beg your pardon!" and she and Reginald Long looked straight into each other's faces. Without the slightest show of discomposure he turned to his shy little wife, who had as yet hardly lifted up her happy eyes. Then, at her request, he changed seats with her, that she might be next her friend—bowed to the other members of Isabel's party, and turned towards his aunt, who sat on his other side.

Clara had only time for a few words of glad surprise before the clash of the orchestra startled her into quiet. She turned towards her husband, and her eyes followed his finger along the lines of the pages.

Once Reginald looked up into his wife's eyes for sympathy, and his glance wandered from her face to Isabel's. Isabel had forgotten herself: the pride that had been shrivelled up to rotten rags, but which she was diligently patching into a new garment; the love that had been the scorching but not consuming fire; the life she was living and resolving to live—and most completely had she forgotten her accepted lover sitting by her side. Her soul was gone out into the heavenly music; her eyes were swimming in soft tears; her mouth was quivering; her white brow, on which the daylight fell full, was upturned to greet it, smooth and placid. She was the Isabel of the best moments of her best time. External things were forgotten; for that while her past was as if it had never been.

Mr. Long's glance rested where it fell; he could not help it. It was a glorified face, the face of Isabel's angel, upon which he gazed. Its spiritual beauty entranced without troubling him.

All this changed when Isabel became conscious of his look: her eyes seemed obliged to meet his, and gloomy,

guilty fire gathered into them. Now it was the face of Isabel's familiar fiend.

"Are you cold, Reginald!" Clara asked, as her husband turned from her with a visible shudder, which stirred the book he held.

Mr. Long only shook his head.

There was an interval between the parts: during this Clara talked to Isabel—not much, because she had so much to say, and did not like to say it there; and, too, Isabel was so stern and silent that even Clara felt chilled. She sat down again, nestling closer to her husband; but over even his face she found a shadow.

Perhaps it was only the music, she thought; beautiful music always made Reginald grave. So she composed herself to listen earnestly—trying to bring her own mood into unison with his, according to her fashion of wifely duty.

Sometimes poor Clara grew rather weary of walking on tiptoe, but she was happy always.

After the oratorio the two parties drew together, and loitered to talk—Clara to Miss Erlridge, Miss Long to everybody, though she seemed in a nervous hurry to get away. And Percy, with Isabel on his arm, must needs find much to say to Reginald Long. He was so talkative, so gay, so little disposed to depart, that at last Reginald Long said quietly—

"Miss Wold is tired; you keep her standing too long; and I am afraid my wife will take cold."

"I am not the least tired," Isabel answered quickly.

But Mr. Long took decided possession of Clara, shawled her most heedfully, and giving his aunt his other arm, hurried them away with short farewells.

"Long looks old and very plain," Percy remarked, as he led Isabel through the gay crowd, receiving many salutations in his progress. "What a hurry he was in!" he added.

"People who can understand it do not feel inclined to loiter about, laughing and talking, after such music as we have heard to-day," Isabel answered sharply.

Percy was silenced. A moment after Isabel took her father's arm, and told Percy to see Miss Erlridge and his sisters home.

"May I not go home with you?" he asked ruefully.

"I am tired, and shall go to my room," she answered. "I should not be good company for anyone."

The crowd separated them. Percy was inclined to be sullen and resentful as he obeyed Isabel's command.

As he mused over the matter, he made up his mind to be dignified and displeased. He retired that night with a determination not to go to Wrangham Farm for some time. He even meditated going home to Burton Lacey for a little while. Isabel used him extremely ill; he would bring her to reason. So he talked over night. Great part of the night, too, he lay awake thinking of his wrongs—the hardship of his case.

A bright, brisk autumn morning found him riding out to Wrangham Farm, leading a horse for Isabel.

She came down to him almost as soon as he arrived. He was not observant of every delicate shade of difference in her beauty; but he now exclaimed—

"How ill you look this morning, Isabel!"

"You are not complimentary," she said, trying to laugh off his concern, and seating herself in the shadow of a window-curtain.

"But you are ill, are you not?" he asked.

"I have not slept well; my head aches. The cathedral was overcrowded and very close," she replied negligently.

"And you were ill when I thought you so unkind last night! Do you know, Isabel, I was inclined to be angry with you."

"Were you? Foolish boy! I told you that my temper was not good. When I am your wife, Percy," (she spoke very slowly), "I daresay I shall often give you far more cause for anger. Think of that. Shall we avoid such danger? Shall we part?"

She looked into his face searchingly.

"Part, Isabel! Good heavens, no, no!"

"Do not look so frightened"—her mouth contrived a smile—"only remember I have warned you."

"And you were suffering last night when I thought you cross! Forgive me, Isabel!"

"Oh, yes, suffering," she said, with bitter emphasis.

"Poor Isabel! I feel wicked for having thought you unkind. Forgive me. Never speak again of parting. Use me as you will, only ——"

Percy stopped short; he was forbidden to implore her to love him.

"I have brought out your horse, but I am sure you are not fit to ride—I am so grieved that you are ill. Let me stay here with you—I will be very quiet—but I must stay with you."

He was sitting in a low chair, bending towards her with sincere penitence and concern, and great love in his handsome face.

Isabel did what she would never have done to any lover whom she *loved*, but only to an inferior friend whom she had wronged, whom she negligently *liked*—she leant towards him—pushed the hair off his forehead, and lightly touched it with her lips, saying, "And I was unkind last night? Poor Percy!"

Not a shade of colour came into her face, but the blood flew wildly into his—he seized her hand, and covered it with kisses; kneeling before her, he pressed it to his face and to his heart, and talked a great deal of nonsense.

"There, there!" Isabel said coldly—"that will do; let me go and dress. I shall like to ride this morning; it will do me good. Go to papa while I get ready; he is in the garden. Mind you are good to him."

A quick ride in the sharp air brought colour to Isabel's face, and quickened the flow of her languid blood. She tried to be as merry as the morning, because she knew how ungracious, how ungrateful she had been the night before. Percy was as one intoxicated with delight—her companionship brightened his wit, and refined his manner; and he was very pleasant and amusing—"nice," as Clara would have said, for the time.

"They rode by hill, they rode by dale."

It was long before they turned homewards.

But when the excitement of the ride was over, and the fatigue consequent upon it made itself felt, Isabel found it difficult to keep up at all. Her night had been one of passionate regret—during its hours she had suffered more keenly, more consciously, more maddeningly than ever before in her life. A sense of guilt had been heavy upon her—in those hours she had *not* been able to deceive herself—she had proved herself a great sinner—now she let Percy talk to her of marrying him soon.

"When that is over, and I am settled in a new home, I shall be quieter," she thought. "It must be; I will not give him up, so it may as well be soon."

So she listened languidly, and smiled absently while he talked about their future—till his continual dwelling upon such words as "home, happiness, love," began to irritate her;

then she told him to go away for the present—adding sternly, before he went—

"Remember, Percy, that I have said that I do not love you. Never accuse me of having deceived you. I do not love you. I never may, perhaps; and they say that it is sinful to marry without love."

"I know, I know," he replied—but he thought more of the lips that had voluntarily touched his brow that morning—of the eyes that had shone upon him kindly, during their ride, than of these stern words.

"She does *like* me; she shall *love* me—even if not, I have love enough for both. How beautiful she is!" so mused Percy on leaving his mistress.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"I AM ENGAGED TO MR. BLANCHARD."

AT last Percy Blanchard was obliged to attend to some other part of the business of life than "courting." He left tolerably content, having Isabel's promise that the wedding should be early in the spring—in the wild March weather probably.

Isabel had been getting rather tired of him; the novelty of his devotion had worn off; yet her life was dull when he left. In answer to his many and ardent letters, she was able to tell him that he was missed—that she missed him—was dull without him—and this was a great concession, he thought.

He would kiss her notes, and mutter triumphantly, "She *shall* love me!" Such short notes they were, and yet took so long to write. What *was* she to say to Percy Blanchard that he could understand?

Isabel was desperately dull: it was gloomy, dark weather, near Christmas, both cold and wet—utterly cheerless.

How was the day to be got through? she wondered drearily, one morning—she who used to find the days too short by half for all she wanted to do in them. She wished that Miss Erlridge—anyone—would come; her father was away, and the quiet of the house was terrible.

Miss Erlridge was not likely to come—they did not see each other often now; reserve had crept over their intercourse. The governess's gravity and sadness were resented by Isabel as tacit reproach; and Miss Erlridge and Percy both disliked and mistrusted each other.

The result of Isabel's meditation was that she ordered the carriage, resolving to go into the town shopping: anything was better than staying in the quiet house. She had grown nervous enough to dread the outwardly dark, fire-lighted hour of fantastic shadows. To sit thinking, thinking, thinking all alone, was to feel herself ready to go mad. Even Percy was longed for sometimes—*even* her future husband!

As she drove up Castle Street, she looked curiously at the house in which they used to live—mechanically read the name replacing her father's over the shop-door, as she had done many times before. She was being driven slowly—the streets were slippery—and her eyes wandered up higher to the projecting, many-casemented window of the sitting-room she had loved well.

The day was so dull and murky that she could see the ruddy glow of a fire shining from the panes; also she saw the outline of a head, which, from its peculiar shape and mane-like hair, reminded her of Leigh Engledow.

"I suppose he will be here in a few days now," she thought, as she leant back again. "I wonder what he will think of—I wish I had written the news—it will be unpleasant to tell—I must be haughty or he may remonstrate."

Isabel blushed slightly even at the thought of meeting Leigh's clear-seeing, truthful eyes—she was afraid of feeling humiliated before them. She occupied several hours in making purchases, preparations for her wedding, and in holding consultations with her dressmaker and milliner.

The street lamps were lighted before she left the town—she was miserably cold and in want of food—dissatisfied with herself and everything; the drive home seemed especially long and tedious. She was in anything but a good humour when she arrived, cold, tired, and unhappy.

"Why is not the hall-lamp lighted?" she asked the servant who let her in, in a sharp, ill-humoured tone. "I hope you have kept up good fires," she added, mounting to the drawing-room, "I am chilled to death almost."

She was answered very submissively—the servants liked her; she was a good mistress. Too proud to let them often feel her ill-humour or vexation; she spent these upon her equals or superiors, and was kind to those beneath her.

There was a splendid fire in the drawing-room, and some one was making it yet brighter as she entered. She stopped half way in her progress towards it.

"Leigh! we did not expect you for days."

"Isabel! I meant to surprise you. You do look almost chilled to death," he said, and drew a great chair close to the fire.

"Yes, and being so cold made me cross, as you heard."

"I did hear an unwonted sharpness of tone. You are altered Isabel," he said, after another look,

"I must be, for I have forgotten to say how glad I am to see you home—you know I am glad."

"I hope so—I believe so."

"Yes; and where is the German maiden I wished to have as a sister-in-law?"

"There is no German maiden who could possibly bear that relationship to you—unless Richard thinks of marrying one."

He began gravely and ended merrily.

"How long have you been here?"

"An hour or two. I have visited the old house."

"Ah! then it was really you I saw as I passed. How strange."

"The family living there seem nice people. Do you know anything of them?"

"Oh no."

"I forgot. I find you 'differently situated.' This is a real mansion, and your dress is in a different style. Oh, you are a grand lady now; you look it, upon my word."

Isabel laughed at his inspection of her costume.

"Where is the violet merino you used to wear at this time of the year?" he asked.

"I do not know, I am sure; violet merinos do not last for ever."

"I am glad you came home when you did. I was getting perplexed, beginning to fancy myself in the wrong house. Your father away, and I could see no traces of old times, no sign of Isabel Wold about, no books looking as if they had been lately used, or music as if it had been just played; and especially, no flowers in the room, except this wreck of a splendid ball bouquet."

"It is December, you know."

"But you have flowers in the green-house."

"Yes, I suppose so. Amuse yourself a little longer, Leigh; I must go and take off my bonnet and cloak."

"Are you warm yet?"

"Yes; your coming has warmed me. This house is so dull, Leigh, I am so much alone."

He pondered over the tone of those words. What scorn Isabel used to have for people not sufficient unto themselves, but wanting external amusement.

Isabel was not long gone; as she came near the drawing-room door, to re-enter it, she heard Leigh playing—by some chance, fragments of the oratorio she had lately heard at the

Cathedral. She paused with her hand on the door, seemed to hesitate to enter, but after a moment went in, when, of course, he stopped.

They stood together by the fire a few moments and spoke of nothing particular. Leigh had not finished a half-wondering, half-admiring inspection of Isabel yet. Then dinner was announced.

"Papa will not be home till late to-night, and so you and I must dine 'alone together,'" Isabel said, taking his offered arm.

"I do think you have been growing ever since I saw you last. How very tall you are, Leigh. My head hardly reaches to your shoulder."

Percy was not much above Isabel's own height.

"Strange; for I was inclined to tell you that you were grown; you looked a lady 'tall and stately,' when you came into the drawing-room."

"I always pass for taller than I am."

"On account of that great 'dignity of demeanour' for which Miss Wold is remarkable," Leigh said laughingly.

There was so much that Isabel and Leigh had to talk about. It was "Do you remember, Isabel?" and "Do you remember, Leigh?" incessantly. Unpleasant topics were avoided in a marvellous manner. Leigh did not venture to speak of Mr. Long; he was very much in the dark, and afraid of taking a wrong step.

Isabel had not been so gay and so thoroughly good-humoured for a long time—the sound of her own laugh would have startled her, had she not been completely interested by that which provoked it.

"To make it quite like old times we must have music this evening. You must play," Leigh added, when a thoughtful pause occurred in the conversation carried on over the drawing-room fire. He went to the piano and began turning over Isabel's music.

"Always restless away from your beloved piano! *you* are not changed," said Isabel.

"Why, what a lot of trashy stuff you have here, Isabel," Leigh exclaimed presently, in a severe voice, "Waltzes, quadrilles, polkas, morceaux de salon, that nothing in the world to recommend them, but well got up title-pages and taking names. You don't play these?" he asked, sternly.

"Sometimes; but never mind those, Leigh; *our* music is here."

Isabel had risen and followed him to the music-stand, but he seemed obstinately determined to continue his inspection of what so much displeased him.

"Percy Blanchard to Isabel! Percy Blanchard to Isabel! What does this mean? Why does *he* give *you* this stuff! Why does he give *you* anything? What does it mean, Isabel?"

Leigh turned full upon Isabel. Her aspect changed immediately, she looked him in the eyes defiantly, and said,—

"I am engaged to Mr. Percy Blanchard."

Leigh turned from her quickly, but not before she had seen pain and scorn look out from his most truthful eyes. She longed to take his hand and say, "Do not you desert me, Leigh; do not you, my one friend, think wholly ill of me."

But now she felt this loveless marriage more than ever as a crime—what excuse had she to offer? None! Yet her engagement should be fulfilled—her promise redeemed. Why not?

On that night, after meeting Mr. Long, she had fully weighed and finally decided upon her course.

Perhaps the engagement had been formed while she was reckless and stupified by despair, and perhaps Leigh's coming might rouse her, his truthfulness enlighten her, his strength strengthen her—his nature had always possessed much influence over hers. But now her honour, as she judged, was concerned; her pride was enlisted on Percy's side, so he was in no danger. All opposition, even from her own conscience, would only make her more surely his now. Doubly warned by the agony of that night, by the pain and humiliation she concealed now—she was warned in vain.

She repeated, as she turned over the music,—Leigh had gone to the other end of the room, and stood leaning on the mantel-piece,—

"Yes; we have been engaged some months, and are to be married in the beginning of March. Shall you be at home then, Leigh?"

"I shall not be at your wedding, Isabel;" then he added, very quietly, "my plans are quite uncertain; I told my German friends that I might return to them in a few weeks, or I might never return at all."

Isabel left off her purposeless turning of leaves, and sat down in her former place.

Neither spoke again of old music, or old times; both felt it a great relief when Mr. Wold came home, to give Leigh a surprised and delighted welcome.

"Poor Leigh!" Isabel said to herself when she sat in her room alone. "Poor Leigh!" she repeated. "It would have been no use." But she continued to think "poor Leigh!" adding, "good Leigh! noble Leigh."

But during the next few days, Isabel was almost able to persuade herself that Leigh needed no pity—he was so cheerful, and like his own self—she must have been mistaken; she would bestow her pity on himself; she had certainly lost something of his old esteem, spite of his care to appear as usual, to treat Isabel as usual, she bitterly felt that she had lost some of his esteem.

After a few days, Leigh went down into the country to see some relations of his mother's—people in very poor circumstances, to whom he hoped to be of use. Also he passed some time at Moor Hall. Then he spent a few more days at Wrangham, before returning to his German home.

"If at any time I can serve you, let me have the opportunity of doing so, Isabel!" Leigh said when they parted.

And Isabel answered—"Thank you, Leigh!" more humbly than it was her wont to speak.

The parting with him cost her a pang! Had she any presentiment how sorely she might one day want a true friend? Or was she conscious that Leigh, true Leigh, noble Leigh, was suffering as—thank God!—men can only suffer once in a lifetime. Yet she breathed more freely when he was gone; she had felt humiliated in his presence; the atmosphere in which he lived was too pure and bracing for Isabel's mental respiration now.

When he was gone she set herself anew to her weary Sysyphus-like task of trying to restore Self to its old pinnacle, of endeavouring to think as well of herself as she wished to be thought of by her world.

But it was a dismal, solitary time.

CHAPTER XL.

AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE.

ON one of the wildest of wild March mornings, Isabel Wold had become Isabel Blanchard.

Some months of foreign travel, some months during which her house had been full of guests, some months of incessant visiting and all descriptions of "gaiety" had carried her through one year of married life.

Her father had made her a long visit immediately on her being "at home," before her season had set in, so Percy had arranged,—"Because he is ashamed of his father-in-law?" questioned Isabel in her own mind.

Mr. Wold had left his daughter, persuaded that she would be an exemplary wife to her devoted husband. He went home content to apply himself more diligently than ever to his various benevolent labours, Isabel's and Richard's letters forming his chief enjoyment. Isabel wrote to her father regularly; long, brilliant letters, giving him detailed and keenly satirical accounts of the society with which she mixed. While the father smiled over these pages, he sighed too; longed for more depth and earnestness of tone, for some glimpses of his daughter's heart, some details of her domestic life. "But Isabel was always reserved!" he thought.

"One year ago," mused Isabel. "But I had better keep no anniversaries now,—had better lose sight of all landmarks along this weary road."

For weeks Percy and Isabel had been alone in their house near London. They had been left to each other's society completely; had stared their home-life full in the face.

The previous night had been a sleepless vigil for Isabel. Now she felt ill and irritable. She was trying to read, to drown the ceaseless-sounding echo of night thoughts. Her

husband, wearing noisy boots, paced up and down the room, yawning audibly now and then.

"*Do* sit down, Percy!" Isabel exclaimed, after several restless movements and unheeded angry glances.

Percy obeyed submissively, and began rustling a newspaper which had been drying by the fire till it was quite crisp.

Isabel bore this new annoyance awhile, then she left the room, taking her book with her.

Percy looked after her, then made a savage attack upon the fire. There was "nothing in the paper;" he paced the room again, waiting for his wife's re-appearance. She did not come, so he went to smoke in the conservatory. Isabel hated the smell of tobacco; but she strove to exact no sacrifices from a husband whom she did not love; so she only shrank from him with ill-concealed disgust when he had been smoking.

An hour or two later, Isabel re-entered the breakfast-room dressed for walking. Percy was there again standing before the fire and whistling. He had no resources in himself, and had acquired a habit of depending upon his wife for amusement, so throwing upon her a burden which she began to feel intolerable.

"What time shall you be home from town to dinner, Percy?" Isabel asked.

"I'm not going into town: why should I?"

"I imagined you might have 'business' there—your club or your tailor to visit."

She spoke scornfully, with half-repressed anger and impatience.

"In short, you wished to get rid of me."

"You find nothing to do at home. I think it would be better for us both if we found separate occupations for the morning," Isabel said resolutely.

"I don't agree with you. It is a wife's duty to amuse her husband."

"Mrs. Mellish! Always give your authority when you make quotations."

"I shall walk out with you this morning. I don't approve of your taking such long rambles with only that dog. It was all very well for Isabel Wold, but it is not proper for Mrs. Percy Blanchard," Percy said consequentially.

Isabel rang and gave her orders. She answered nothing to Percy; but her heart was full of bitterness. Even the

kind of wild pleasure she had found in her solitary country walks was to be hers no longer, she thought.

"I have taken him for my husband, so he has a right to take all joy out of my life!" she said to herself. She took the arm Percy offered her, and they started, Wolf following soberly. They had little to say to each other; and it was not long before Isabel proposed going home, complaining that the day was cold and gloomy.

"You generally walk much further. You used to like a wind like this—when you had a more interesting companion than your husband, I suppose."

"You were always my companion—were you not, Wolf?" Isabel stooped to caress the dog. Of course the tender regretful tone of these words was provoking.

"The dirty brute!" Percy exclaimed. "He has splashed us all over; he has just been into that muddy pool. Look at your glove, Isabel! I wonder that you, who are so fastidious, can endure this great creature!"

"I love him!"

Isabel looked into her husband's face defiantly. Percy kicked the dog—Isabel drew her hand from Percy's arm, and they walked home in silence.

"I am growing a poor, irritable, contemptible creature," commented Isabel.

She pitied Percy as she glanced at his clouded face. Before she went to her room to remove her bonnet she made a slight overture to reconciliation. The husband thought it dignified to show his wounded feelings by maintaining a sulky silence, and keeping out of the way till dinner-time.

"Who is that very beautiful woman? There! The one with red flowers in her hair?" was asked by a gentleman at Mrs. Handford's assembly that night.

"Do not you know?" the hostess answered, wonderingly. "Mrs. Percy Blanchard; such an accomplished woman! and as you say, very beautiful."

"Excuse my benighted condition! I have been long abroad, you know. Who *was* Mrs. Percy Blanchard?"

"Ah! Now if *you* could tell us that! Nobody knows."

"I certainly have seen that face before."

"Have you! Do remember when and where!"

"For the last hour I have vainly been trying to do so."

"Shall I introduce you?"

"Not just now. I would not interrupt her animated talk. Who is she speaking to?"

"The young poet. They have discovered that they have some dear friend in common; a musician living in Germany, I believe. How interested she looks. Oh! she *is* beautiful when animated!"

"Where is her husband? The Blanchards are a kind of connection of mine, through my friend Waynton, in a most roundabout manner."

"That small, handsome, moustached young man, in that corner,—who, by-the-bye, looks considerably bored,—is Percy Blanchard. I will introduce you to him; he will be grateful, and perhaps you may be able to discover who his wife was, if you are skilful."

"So she has been admitted into society quite on faith," said Mr. Bell, as his hostess took him across the room. "I must confess I do like to know who is who, but in this instance there can be nothing to conceal."

Mrs. Handford, having introduced Mr. Blanchard to Mr. Bell, went to do duty elsewhere.

Mr. Bell was a gentleman of easy address. He roused Percy from the sullenness into which he had sunk, while watching Isabel's unusually interested face, and led the conversation into a favourable channel for the gratification of his curiosity.

"I have not had the honour of an introduction to Mrs. Blanchard, and yet I am sure that we have met before." He said presently—"Was she acquainted with the Wayntons before her marriage?"

"I believe not," Percy answered; he felt uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken. He was not *now* proud of his heroism in having married a shopkeeper's daughter; his was not a sufficiently strong nature to maintain for long any feeling opposed to the prejudices of those with whom he mixed. He was very proud of Isabel, but also very anxious that her antecedents should remain unknown.

"Strange! I seem to associate her with the Wayntons. She is turning towards us now; may I beg the honour of an introduction?" Mr. Bell said.

Percy complied reluctantly.

When Mr. Bell addressed her, Mrs. Blanchard's thoughts instantly flew over intermediate years, returned to Caiston and the waiting-room at the station. She remembered Mr. Bell as the gentleman whose conversation with Mr. Waynton she and Miss Erlridge had overheard, as the gentleman who advocated the necessity of drawing a line—who deplored the

confusion of ranks, and thought poor Long mad, on account of his advocating levelling doctrines and entertaining the thought of marrying a member of the commercial classes.

Isabel's manner to Mr. Bell was very haughty as she recalled these things. He appeared to her as an enemy—as a personification of the prejudice against which her pride had dashed itself, and upon which her happiness, peace, goodness, had been wrecked.

Percy, who stood sentinel behind his wife's chair, wondered at her manner. Mr. Bell did not think Mrs. Blanchard so perfectly beautiful as she had seemed to him when he watched her from a distance. Her mouth had too scornful a curve, her eyes too keen an expression, the outline of her features was quite too clear and sharp. He took exception to her manner also.

"She is a haughty aristocrat, who feels herself in but second-rate society, and sets me down as some nobody"—was his mental comment; and, though he had held that

> "If we stand not by our order, we
> In England, we fall headlong,"

yet he resented Mrs. Blanchard's cold pride not a little. He piqued himself upon his success with ladies, and now took infinite pains to break down this reserve, to interest Isabel and make her face kindle as he had seen that it could do. He decided that some accidental likeness had deceived him—that he had not seen Mrs. Blanchard before; but still he puzzled himself to discover to whom she bore such likeness, and watched her keenly as he bent down towards her.

Mr. Bell talked eloquently about scenes they had both visited in their foreign travels—about pictures, poetry, and music. Isabel spoke freely of these things. All she said betokened close observation, keen intellect, a naturally refined and a highly cultivated taste. Nothing could be less superficial, yet all was from the surface. She seemed to guard against any honest enthusiasm or earnestness—to guard against betraying any glimpse of her inner self. Her husband stood close beside her, listening to every word, admiringly triumphing in her victory when she chose to express opposite opinions to Mr. Bell's on art or literature—chose to contest his theories. This she did, sometimes, as a mere wanton exercise of power.

They had been talking for more than half-an-hour, quite undisturbed by the murmur and flutter all round. Mrs.

Blanchard's manner was as cold and proud as when Mr. Bell first addressed her, and Mr. Bell began to tire of being opposed, and made to contradict himself, and of seeing how Percy, who ventured a few words occasionally, felt that his wife was most decidedly getting the best of it.

"One should not even wish for victory when arguing with a lady," Mr. Bell said presently, and there followed a pause in the conversation, for Isabel vouchsafed no reply.

"Isn't that young fellow—that poet—very conceited, Isabel?" Percy asked, taking an opportunity of claiming his wife's attention.

"I did not think him so," Isabel answered with measured gentleness.

"I suppose that his poems are not worth much. I hear that he is quite one of the people. Such men are turning up everywhere now, by-the-bye!" Mr. Bell said, with a slight gesture of disgust. "I may be too fastidious; but to my mind it is simply impossible that a poet should arise from his class."

"It is the fashion to make much of a few individuals, and spend scorn upon their class," answered Isabel.

"A fashion which I contemn!" Mr. Bell rejoined warmly. "I daresay this is a worthy young man; but he will be ruined. If he is not conceited now he will become so. It is not likely that he has the stuff in him from which poets are made. He cannot have received a classical education—he cannot have kept the ideal pure from injurious contact with the real. The poetic part of his nature must have been blunted and hardened by daily contact with things low and mean. I am quite sceptical of the capability of his class to produce any kind of artist who shall out-last the age. I can believe in a poet ploughman—nay, even in a poet postman; but it is hard to believe in a poet shopkeeper. I am sure that here we must agree, Mrs. Blanchard; I have so much reason on my side."

Percy pressed his hand down upon his wife's shoulder heavily. She only said—

"If it is true that poets are born poets, your theory is based upon a fallacy."

"I should like to argue out my cause, Mrs. Blanchard," Mr. Bell resumed. "I shall hope for an opportunity of doing so. It is grievous to me to see a young man like that raised out of his proper position in society. His short popularity past, his little songs sung out, and himself forgotten—what is

he fit for? Nothing! He is too proud to resume his own place behind desk or counter—he believes in himself, and, when others have ceased to believe in him, he spends his life in ravings against the world—sometimes ends it by his own hand. While, had he been left alone, he would have acted out his little folly, sown his wild oats in verse very harmlessly, and then sobered down into a useful and respectable member of the middle class to which he belongs. No; I cannot believe in a poet-tradesman. The two ideas are too incongruous. Have you read the young man's book? I hope I have not been running on against one whose writings are really worthy of admiration. The exception proves the rule, you know. It is the rule I hold by. Have you read these poems? Are they really worth anything as poetry?"

Isabel had shaken off her husband's hand and sat erect. Mr. Bell saw some expression kindling in her face at last.

"I have read the poems," she answered. "But by the same rule which precludes the possibility of Mr. Kennaught's writing poetry (unless he is the one exception of the age), I must not presume to judge of his writing, unless I am, as I cannot believe I am—the one exception in another way. I am a shopkeeper's daughter, Mr. Bell—a member of the commercial middle class of which you have spoken."

Mr. Bell shrank from the indomitable pride shining out from all Isabel's face, as she said these words very quietly. *Now*, at last, he remembered where they had met before—even remembered her name, which he had learned afterwards from Mrs. Waynton, when he had spoken of the beautiful girl they had seen at the Caiston station. Yes! he remembered of whom he and Mrs. Waynton had talked; how probable it was that she had overheard! He remembered, too—what he had since been told—her rejection of Reginald Long.

Percy thought that Mr. Bell shrank away in disgust. Isabel knew that he felt humbled.

Just then Mrs. Handford came to request that Mrs. Blanchard would play and sing. Percy muttered an evil-sounding reproach as he took his wife to the piano.

"I should not like to be Percy Blanchard!" thought Mr. Bell. "How scornfully his wife looked at him! And he is a poor-spirited young fellow, to be ashamed of her former station, now he has married her. Very strange that she refused Long, and has now married this man! Poor creature! spite of her beauty, accomplishments, and cultivation, she is much to be pitied. Another proof of the evil done by Long's

favourite leveller, education, irrespective of considerations of social rank. Instead of blossoming lowlily and happily, a very fair flower upon the garden-bed of her class, she has been over-cultivated, over-tended, till the soil suiting others of her kind was not enough for her nourishment, and she had to be removed to the hot-house, developed into a brilliant, short-lived exotic."

So wisely may men reason on utterly false premises.

"Well, well! I will keep her secret. I will not be the instrument of further pain, though her eyes flung the secret at me as an insult. What a voice! what exquisite intonation! too much passion for a drawing-room, perhaps. Evidently she is a woman of great natural abilities."

Then Mr. Bell gave himself up to the enjoyment of that singing which arrested every whisper or movement throughout the company. He forgot to wonder why Isabel had been gifted with talents quite out of keeping with her former social standing—to reflect how much better it would be if each soul entered the world only endowed with those qualities most fitting for the rank of the body it is to animate. How much easier it would then be for each class to be kept within strict bounds! There would then be no great turbulent spirits to burst through all restraints—to keep themselves above all ranks—to proclaim that a man is a man—that not only the king but the pauper was made after the image of the Most High—that it is not the object of life to narrow and limit the soul to the positive wants and uses of its body; but so to honour the Ideal, the image in it, as to spend the power, all life, in striving to conform itself to the Absolute, Highest Life. Isabel knew this practically as little as Mr. Bell owned it theoretically. One on either side of the social hedge, they each saw only their own phase of truth in their own opposite manner.

Percy, enjoying the admiration his wife's musical talent excited, almost forgave her her late indiscretion. He smiled upon her lovingly as he led her from the piano.

But the dread secret which Mr. Bell had honourably resolved to keep was doomed to be revealed this very night.

"Can you satisfy general curiosity as to who Mrs. Percy Blanchard was before her marriage?" Mrs. Handford asked Sir Wilton Watkins, when he made his very late appearance in her drawing-rooms for the first time that season.

"Oh, yes! I used often to see her at Burton Lacey before her marriage."

"She was a friend of the Blanchards, then?"

"Why, she was not there exactly as an equal. A kind of companion to Miss Blanchard, you understand!" Sir Wilton spoke in a half-whisper, and with assumed reluctance, while his small eyes twinkled with malicious pleasure.

"Ah, poor thing! member of some good old family reduced in circumstances, no doubt." Mrs. Handford was a little shocked, but very compassionate.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Sir Wilton.

"Am I mistaken? surely not!" asked the lady apprehensively.

"Why, *rather*," Sir Wilton answered; lowering his tone yet more, he added, "Mrs. Blanchard's father was a man of the name of Wold, a tradesman—shopkeeper—in fact, a hosier in Caiston!"

Mrs. Handford recoiled. "You don't mean it? Who would have thought it? How is one to know? Do not mention it further, pray!"

"No doubt you've heard of her before. Before she hooked that soft Percy Blanchard, she angled for a larger fish, unsuccessfully. Long of Moor Hall was nearly caught!" Sir Wilton spoke louder now.

"On that point my information is better than yours, Sir Wilton," said Mr. Bell, whom they had not noticed, lounging in the window behind. "My most intimate friend, Waynton, is connected with Long by marriage. I know it to be a fact that Miss Wold refused Reginald Long."

"And afterwards accepted young Blanchard! The absurdity of the thing is patent. My good fellow, you have been imposed upon. Ha! ha! don't ask me to believe *that!*"

"Believe it or not, as you please—it is a fact, Mrs. Handford."

"A tradesman's daughter refuse Mr. Long, of Moor Hall! —a tradesman's daughter my guest!" murmured the bewildered hostess.

"Too good to be true, the first statement—even in this age," said Sir Wilton.

"Doubt the accuracy of my information, if you please, Sir Wilton," Mr. Bell said, sternly. "But I think you might speak of Mrs. Blanchard with more circumspection. Mrs. Handford, besides the misfortune of her extraction, there is nothing against your guest. That she was too proud was, I believe, her only fault. You may rest assured that she is a

woman of refinement and cultivation, fitted to adorn a higher rank than the one she fills."

"If *you* become the champion of the hosier's daughter, why ——"

Mr. Bell marched away with a look of disgust. "Good breeding does not necessarily ensue from good birth," he thought.

Spite of Mrs. Handford's request to the contrary, Sir Wilton was quite ready, in strict confidence, to satisfy all curiosity about Mrs. Percy Blanchard.

Little shocks of consternation were felt now in one, now in another part of the room. Those who had been guilty of most admiration for the mysterious Mrs. Blanchard, were now most angry. They felt that they had been betrayed into a false and humiliating position.

Very startling to ears polite was the murmur that ran round the room. Mr. Bell, quietly taking notes, felt that there was something farcical in the expression of wonder and horror which he saw on one face after another: yet he, of course, sympathised with the feeling so expressed. His observations, however, made him suspect what was indeed the truth—that those most demonstrative of their display, carried in their bosoms the consciousness of possessing low relations, connections engaged in retail business, or ancestors whom they did not talk about. Such people guarded their secret strictly and remorsefully as they might guard the conviction of deadly sin, thought they buried it most successfully when they heaped upon it words and deeds of scorn for convicted transgressors. And, as a large proportion of this company belonged to the upper ranks of the middle class, though they did not own it, there were many who were peculiarly sensitive on this matter of trade. *New* people who are working their way upwards, who can never succeed in forgetting the lowness of the origin of the father, or grandfather, to whom they owe their wealth, are obliged to be cautious, to keep their society pure from the taint of trade; just a person of reformed, lately-doubtful character must be more circumspect in the choice of associates than the man or woman of irreproachable conduct needs to be.

Mrs. Percy Blanchard, who sat as if enthroned in Mrs. Handford's drawing-room, a distinguished guest at one of Mrs. Handford's most eclectic reunions, a centre of attraction to all that was wisest and wittiest in that society—Mrs. Percy Blanchard, who could speak German with the German,

Italian with the Italian, French with the French—who could talk of music, art, and poetry so as to delight the musician, the artist, the poet—who moved with finished grace, and spoke with quiet perfection—who took all homage as if it were her right—she a shopkeeper's daughter!

Far less consternation would have been excited had it been discovered that she was a woman of doubtful character, or the offspring of some criminal of high rank in crime and society.

Glances of horror were cast at Isabel, who remained perfectly unconscious of the storm. She was surrounded by a little court to whom the news had not yet penetrated.

"If this is true," said Mrs. Handford, impressively, when she found that, spite of her request, the intelligence was pretty generally diffused—"and, of course, I cannot doubt it—how *is* one to know who to notice? Who was to imagine that Mrs. Percy Blanchard was not all that one could wish?"

"If her merits are so apparent, and her one disqualification could not betray itself, what harm is done?" asked a gentleman of whom the ladies stood somewhat in awe.

"You inclined to side with an upstart?" was asked, wonderingly.

"There is one thing to be said, that whoever she *was*, she *is* Mrs. Percy Blanchard; and the Blanchards, everyone knows, are a really good old family."

"Most true! my dear Madam, you may rest on that comfortable fact. In the highest circles it is often necessary completely to shut one's eyes to what a lady was, and to remember only what she is." This gentleman spoke with a great and grave assumption of authority, laughing inwardly the while.

"I am glad that Sir Hugh makes light of it!" sighed the hostess, as she watched that gentleman make his way towards Isabel very deliberately.

"But, indeed, I am not inclined to regard it as he does!" said an old lady, who had a reputation for candour, and made the most of it. "I think unequal marriages ought to be prevented by law; they jumble one rank with another, and make shocking confusion. Things are very different from what they were when I was young: then one knew who was who and what was what, but now ——"

"I really could not help this, Mrs. Griffin; I am as much deceived as anyone," said Mrs. Handford, apologetically.

"I know, my dear, I'm not blaming you; but I do think it

is shocking. Now-a-days one is never safe—cannot go into society without danger of coming into contact with the sons and daughters of one's own tradesmen!"

"Here comes the husband: do take care," Mrs. Handford said, warningly.

"Stupid young fellow? I am almost inclined to speak my mind to him!" said the energetic old woman. "Look at her now, queening it there—that Sir Hugh paying court to her just because she's good-looking—when she ought to be selling gloves and stockings in her father's shop."

Percy caught that last dreadful word, though Mrs. Handford drew him out of the neighbourhood of the dangerous and indignant Mrs. Griffin, and talked to him hurriedly about his wife's singing and playing.

It was getting late. Isabel rose now, and came slowly down the long room towards her hostess and her husband. One gentleman was by her side, reproaching her for breaking up the party so early; another followed with her cloak upon his arm; a third was collecting her scattered music. Percy knew the meaning of the looks that followed his wife's graceful movements.

The husband and wife went home in silence. Percy was sullenly resentful; Isabel exhausted and dissatisfied: she had already found out that she was not fit to be a mere fine lady; that such a life could not content her; she was always conscious of a desperate, unsatisfied craving; of a capacity for far other things.

CHAPTER XLI.

IMPOTENT!

ISABEL did not minutely observe every varying expression of her husband's face; yet she divined that something had happened to annoy him when he came home from town next day.

Nothing had passed between them concerning Isabel's "imprudent and uncalled for" disclosure of the night before: she had well-nigh forgotten the whole affair.

When Percy came in, Isabel was sitting in the drawing-room, reading; he had kept the dinner waiting some time, but that was no great crime in Isabel's eyes; she was very quietly dressed for receiving company at home, and was in one of her not-to-be-ruffled moods, which were peculiarly aggravating to poor Percy when he was in any way put out.

Isabel laid down her book and listened with perfect composure to several ill-humoured speeches of her husband's; he found fault with her dress, giving her to understand that *he* must know better than she could what it was fitting for Mrs. Percy Blanchard to wear; then said—

"I met that young scribbler with whom you were so much taken last night, just now; he wanted to be asked here, and made all sorts of pretty speeches about you; but I gave him to understand that I didn't mean to have him hanging about my wife. I don't choose that you should get mixed up with that set."

Isabel coloured slightly now. She was acquiring a habit of repeating to herself certain axioms when she felt in danger of losing her temper, forgetting her dignity, as she called it.

"What are you muttering, Isabel?" Percy demanded.

"A wise saying for my own edification."

"What?"

"You had better not enquire."

"I *will* know."

"Then you shall know. I was reminding myself that when a woman marries a man of an unrefined nature, she must not

imagine that he will respect her refinement." Isabel spoke with a placid, proud simplicity, that was most provoking.

Percy left the drawing-room, closing the door violently. Wolf was lying on the mat outside. Isabel heard him give a yelp of pain. She started up with a passionate face, only to sit down again, tightly compressing her lips.

"Will he ever strike me, I wonder?" she muttered; "if he does, how shall I bear it? How? Why, quietly! I am his wife—there will be no redress—he may beat me as safely as my dog. It will be hard, but I have brought all upon myself."

The servant announced that dinner was served, and his master in the dining-room. Isabel paused, as she passed through the hall, to caress Wolf; he looked after her wistfully, but dared not follow her.

During dinner, Percy addressed the greater part of his conversation to the servant; making enquiries about the coachman's opinion of some new horses; he thought he would punish Isabel by justifying her censure, showing the want of refinement of which she accused him. The man wondered, and looked hesitatingly at his lady, but Isabel did not appear to hear a word that passed.

Isabel felt that they must effect some kind of reconciliation before the arrival of curious-eyed strangers. When they were alone, she asked, "What has happened in town to-day to irritate my lord and master?"

"You do not care to know."

"Humph! You have tried to spoil my appetite because I annoyed you just now, because you insulted me, because something had irritated you. There is a fine version of the House that Jack built! I think it well, Percy, for your honour and my own, that we should at least appear on tolerably good terms this evening." Isabel spoke very deliberately, picking one grape after another from the bunch on her plate.

"Don't trouble yourself to make peace on that account. I do not suppose that anyone will come. It is known now, by all our set, who you were; thanks to your own folly. It was nicely talked over at the Handfords' last night. Sir Wilton told me all about it this morning. Of course all the best people will drop us. I think you did it purely to provoke me. It was abominable of you. I didn't think you were so destitute of all proper sense of what you owe to the position I have given you." Percy had not sufficient

control over himself, or sufficient delicate regard for his wife's feelings, to hide the cause of his ill humour.

Did Isabel feel the bitterness of the humiliation she had brought upon herself by marrying out of her own station? And for what? Love? No!

Percy was a little frightened, both at his wife's silence, and at the tone in which she presently asked, "Did you expect to keep my former position, my father's occupation, a secret, Percy?"

"Why, well I didn't, of course, want it talked about. Now, don't put yourself in a passion, Isabel. Of course I am not ashamed of you—I mean ——"

"Oh, I thank you most humbly for not being ashamed of your poor wife," she said, rising, looking at him with such a face; agonies of scorn, pride, anger, heart-breaking pain sweeping over it.

"You know, Isabel, I don't mean that—I ——"

"Not even that! well!—I do know, Percy, that a man *marrying beneath* him" Percy winced at the emphasis laid on those words) "need never hope to keep his wife's former position a secret. I remember that I often told you so. I also remember in what fine words you answered. I did not, of course, believe all those words; but, perhaps, enough of them to think that you would not be mean enough, not coward enough, not fool enough, to feel ashamed of your wife."

Isabel stood leaning over her chair, her glowing eyes fixed upon her husband's face. She spoke low, not loud. Very beautiful she looked.

"If you wish to sink very low in society, you will show that you are ashamed of what you have done. If you wish to keep a tolerable position you will conceal your penitence and shame." Isabel had no more to say, and left the room.

"Ashamed of her," thought Percy. He longed to throw himself at her feet, and tell her he didn't care for the whole world if she would but love, instead of scorn him.

But while this love and longing were struggling with sullen pride, Isabel went away.

The emotion uppermost in her mind, as she paced her own room, was a fierce longing for power. Power which she could make felt—which should enable her to revenge herself upon the world! to pay scorn for scorn, and make her hatred a dread thing. Her imagination realised all sorts of wild possibilities for the future.

"Not worth struggling for! all hollow and imperfect!" she decided, as her excitement cooled. "I *know* they could not satisfy me. The world may go its way, I will not struggle into its high places. I will just bear my life as well as I may. The world may go its way!"

Isabel sat alone over the drawing-room fire in the dark hour, and cowered at the aspect of the long years to come. High and holy aims were not for this unloving wife, yet low and worldly ones could not animate her.

The long years to come! years of thwarted aspiration, of clogged endeavour. Years during which indifference must be the most tolerable and the least sinful feeling she could entertain for the man to whom she had absolutely given herself.

She had crippled her life! For those long years she must be lame and impotent. Impotent! That last word was terrible to Isabel—as anyone could have told who had peered into that despairing face.

"This will pass—this will pass! It must, or I cannot live!" she muttered.

Some of Isabel's guests came that evening, some sent excuses; the latter "dropped" the Blanchards altogether. Those who came were charmed with their hostess, who played, sang, talked, listened, moved, or sat still—in fact, did everything—perfectly. Percy was gratified to find that among those who evidently decided that his wife was too charming an acquaintance to be given up, were a few of the people whose support would be most useful and desirable for Isabel. This discovery helped him to forgive her imprudence and disregard of his feelings; it induced him to be more amiable, and to show a little regard for hers. Things went smoothly for a while between Percy and his wife; they both dreaded the recurrence of a scene. Isabel was guarded, prudent, patient; she over-acted her part sometimes, and angered poor Percy by her show of submission, which reminded him, though it was not meant to be ostentatious, that he had a wife who would try to pay him in obedience what she failed to render in love.

CHAPTER XLII.

"I WILL DO MY DUTY."

"WHAT do you say to it?" Percy asked his wife. They sat at the breakfast table, which was drawn into the open bow-window, one lovely June morning. Isabel had just read a letter from Clara, and had given it to Percy; she was meditating on what she had read with downcast eyes, and a slightly smiling mouth—her heartstrings were quivering from the touch of a new and strangely sweet emotion.

"The question is what do you wish. You are the master!" she answered, smilingly and meekly; but the smile was sad, the meekness a sadder comment upon it.

"Well, I've often wondered that we did not get an invitation to Moor Hall; you and Clara used to be such friends!"

"You wish to go?" Isabel asked rather wonderingly, for she knew there was no love lost between Percy and Mr. Long.

"Certainly. I shall not be jealous of Long, though I did once think—no matter what!" he added, as his wife's eyes lightened upon him, no meekness in them then. "I shall not be jealous of Long, for he is evidently quite wrapped up in his wife and child—he was just the man to be!"

"I am to tell Clara we will come, then. When?"

"Isabel, I wish you would not make such a parade of your obedience—it's quite oppressive!" Percy said, angrily. "You have a pretty strong will of your own; just use it! Your words and your looks are always contradicting each other!"

"Mrs. Mellish says a wife should know no will but her husband's," Isabel replied, demurely, speaking at the dictation of her evil spirit.

"Confound Mrs. Mellish! I suppose I shall never hear the last of her! Well! my will now is that you please yourself. I should like you to go; a visit to Moor Hall is desir-

able just now. People will see that the Longs willingly accept you as one of the family, and it's dull enough here: everybody out of town."

"Shall we go in July? Clara says as soon as we like."

"Why not sooner, then? You are not looking well, Isabel. I think a change will do you good; it is a long journey, and if we wait till the weather is hot, it will fatigue you."

"Thank you, Percy, for thinking of me; we will go next week. Thank you! I shall like this visit; seeing Clara with her baby," Isabel added, softly, looking out with wistful eyes.

"Isabel, do I not always think of you? do I not always love you? would I not do anything to please you?" Percy asked earnestly, touched at her gentle tone.

"You are more good to me than I deserve, Percy; once for all, I confess that." Isabel's eyes were full of tears, whether in consequence of the dazzling summer brightness from which she withdrew them to fix them on her husband's face, or from emotion of some passionate or penitent kind, perhaps she herself hardly knew. Whatever it was, the tears fell down the white cheeks into her lap, and Percy saw them.

He put his arm round her—"Love, Isabel, what is the matter? are you ill?" he asked in great concern—he leant over her and kissed her.

For a moment the wife's head rested on that fitting resting-place, her husband's bosom! Percy felt a thrill of joy, spite of his alarm; he folded her in a passionate embrace, and called her all manner of tender names.

But Isabel disengaged herself, wiped her eyes, smiled coldly, called herself foolish, and assured him that nothing was the matter.

Her manner wounded poor Percy:—it seemed to remind him:—

"Remember, Sir, you are not a beloved husband who can soothe your wife's pain, by kissing away her tears." He soon left her, going out-doors to smoke, and to ponder moodily over his wife's unlovingness.

Isabel sat still in the window, Clara's letter lying on her knee: she looked out upon the hopeful early morning, early summer beauty, and an intensity of expression grew upon her face. Percy was startled, strolling past the window, and looking in upon her.

"Of what were you thinking?" he asked.

A little colour was brought into her cheek by the abruptness of the question, but she looked into her husband's face with the same expression with which she had looked out.

"Of Clara's baby," she answered.

"Oh! Well, I hope it won't annoy us much, Isabel." Percy replaced his cigar in his mouth and strolled out; next time he passed he did not see Isabel in the room.

When he came into the house he found her writing to Clara.

"Don't you want to go to town to make some preparations for this visit?" he asked. "Shall I order the carriage?"

"No. I do not need to go to town," she answered, without looking up.

"Now! don't sulk, Isabel, because I happened to say your milliner's bill was heavy. We *do* get through a lot of money; but I wish you to look very nice at Moor Hall and at Burton Lacey—we shall go there, of course."

"I cannot write while you talk, Percy," Isabel said, very sharply; his words jarred harshly upon her thoughts.

"Oh! I'll leave you, then. *I* am going into town."

Isabel wrote a very short note to Clara; doing little more than appoint a time for their visit: but it took her a long time to write those few lines.

When she had at last finished she went into the garden, taking a book with her. She saw her husband riding down the road.

"He meant kindly just now, and I hurt him!" she muttered, as she looked after him. "Whatever I suffer, I have brought my sufferings upon myself. I must remember this! I have no right to hurt him."

This was not the most bitter truth that Isabel was to be taught to utter. This she administered to herself as stern consolation, strengthening cheer; but the truth which she was to be taught through the fulfilment of prayers, forced from her lips by her own sore and utter need, was to be bitter indeed!

Isabel did not read much this morning. She paced up and down a little larch-grove till she was tired, then she sat down at the foot of a tree, leant her head against it, and fell into a kind of stupor of dreamy misery.

The beauty of the time lay heavy upon her soul—doubling

burdens and wildening regrets—showing her fair, pure, holy things; then mockingly crying, "Nevermore."

And when Isabel opened her book, to seek for thoughts less intolerable than her own, she read these words :—

> "Entbehren sollst du! sollst entbehren!
> Das ist der ewige Gesang,
> Der jedem an dieohren klingt,
> Den, unser ganzes Leben lang,
> Uns heiser jede Stunde singt."

She was startled at her own desperate dejection. She was so young already to have lost all hope in life. Life *must* bring her some good gifts yet! What?

She rose shivering with cold, and went into the house.

"I am going to the Mellishs' to-night, and they want you, too," Percy said, when he came home.

"You know, Percy, that I will not go there. I am sure that they are people whom you ought not to wish your wife to visit."

"And I have told you that they are received in good society, and that I don't know why you should be so particular. But do you want me to stay at home with you?" His eyes were wistful as he asked this.

"I have no right to deprive you of any pleasure. You must judge for yourself. I think you lose a great deal of money when you play cards there—and ——"

"No lecturing, pray! I have my way of spending money, you yours. If you cared to have me at home it would be different."

Isabel only sighed. She did not know how light a word of hers would have kept her husband from evil, for that evening at least. This was a matter of which she was weary. Percy went.

Isabel's evening was not enviable.

Isabel had married Percy with the expectation of being able to do her duty and to make him happy; vague duty, vague happiness. She had believed that all passion was dead within her, and that indifference would make life easy.

She found that she had been wrong! Yet still she clung, despairingly now, to self-respect: still she tried to drug her conscience with sophistry. But, this day and night, vainly!

Misery and half-recognised remorse were Isabel's companions, as she sat up for her husband.

He came home just when the early birds were beginning to twitter in the shrubs outside the windows.

Percy was angry that she had waited for him, and quarrelled with each word she said. She carried herself with meekness.

Watching the dawn come on and on, her wide-open eyes refusing to close, Isabel sickened at the thought of the dawn after dawn that must break for her, never to brighten unto day.

"I will do my duty!" was once more her resolve.

But in her imagination duty was very limited; to bear her husband's ill-humour; to conceal her pain; to conquer any aspirations beyond what, she fancied, was the only life that could be hers, as Percy Blanchard's wife—this was well-nigh all. Too much and too little. Less, far less, than her duty—far too much for her unaided strength.

CHAPTER XLIII

CLARA'S BABY.

"WE are come to take a lesson of you happy married folk!" was one of Percy's first remarks to Clara after he and Isabel had arrived at Moor Hall. An awkward speech, as even he felt when it was spoken. "Not but that we are very happy!" he added, meeting his wife's eyes. "Of course we are happy!"

"I should think so," laughed Clara; but her smile died suddenly when she looked at Isabel's face.

Percy and Isabel had arrived in time for a late dinner. Almost immediately afterwards, Clara proposed to Isabel that they should leave the gentlemen and the dining-room for the nursery, "to see baby and talk over old times."

Isabel rose to follow Clara. But Clara paused on the staircase, and said—

"Percy will like to see baby, too; he will think me unkind not to remember that." Her heart smote her for having forgotten this, and she was turning back to the dining-room.

"Percy can wait: he does not care for babies—gentlemen never do," Isabel answered.

"Oh, but you should see what a capital nurse Reginald makes! and how fond he is of little Mary!"

"Mary—is it called Mary?"

"Yes, after Mary Waynton and Reginald's Aunt Mary; it was always a favourite name of Reginald's. I wanted it to have been called Isabel; for once, I did not have my way."

The nurse was sent away when the two ladies entered the nursery. Baby was asleep, and there was little of her to be seen but the tiny fist which she held against her face. Clara and Isabel settled themselves by a window, furthest from the cradle, to talk and to watch the sunset light flush and fade upon the stems of the pines in the avenue. But silence fell

as they sat hand in hand. They had too much to talk of to know where to begin.

Isabel started when, by a series of cooing sounds, the baby announced that it was awake.

"Let me take her up? May I?" Isabel asked humbly. This humble manner of hers was a pain and perplexity to Clara.

"Of course you may, Isa. Only I am afraid she will cry." But little Mary was in the most placid of her placid moods; she smiled up into Isabel's serious, down-looking eyes, with a smile that went straight to Isabel's heart. Many tears dropped on the baby's face; as she wiped them off Isabel looked timidly at the mother, as if to ask her pardon that tears had fallen on her darling.

She did not keep the child in her arms long. She had not kissed it, spoken to it, or said a word in its praise, when she gave it back to Clara. She had only looked at it with soul-full eyes. Yet Clara was quite satisfied that her baby was appreciated; but she gazed into Isabel's face very wistfully. There were so many things she longed to say—and dared not! The quiet twilight-time slipped away silently; Isabel watching each baby-movement with an intense regard, not heeding that Clara watched her almost as earnestly.

"I do not deserve to be a *happy* mother, because I am not a loving wife." This was the burden of Isabel's thoughts.

"We must go down to Reginald and Percy," Clara said, when the nurse returned, bringing a light into the dim room.

"Why, it has grown quite dark!" Isabel's manner changed entirely. She showed no more sadness, or even seriousness, that evening, or at any time while she stayed at Moor Hall; unless when she was alone in Clara's nursery, which she contrived to be sometimes. She played, sang, talked, laughed, rode, and walked indefatigably, astonishing Percy by her liveliness.

Mr. Long's manner pained Isabel, and she strove to resent it. It was so formal and ungenial! Spite of his courtesy, it constantly reminded her that she had forfeited his respect and esteem. It was a relief to her that her visit to Moor Hall was unexpectedly shortened.

Mr. Blanchard had been ailing for some months. Greville wrote to say that his father thought himself failing fast, and anxiously desired to have his eldest son and his daughter-in-law at Burton Lacey at once. Clara and Isabel parted, ex-

pecting to meet again soon, for Mr. Long talked of taking his wife to see her father.

It was very strange to Isabel to travel the old familiar road, to be going to Burton Lacey as Percy Blanchard's wife—to remember that soon she might be absolute mistress there.

At Alderton Park station Sir Wilton Watkins Darrall got into the same carriage that they occupied. He strove to make himself very agreeable to Mr. and Mrs. Percy Blanchard. His manner, which was almost cringing in its efforts to be ingratiating, puzzled Isabel. "What does he want of Percy, I wonder?" was her constant thought. She did not take much pains to conceal her dislike of Sir Wilton. He writhed inwardly under one or two of her sharp, sarcastic speeches. She might have been more circumspect, had she known that he planned revenge—had she remembered how much low cunning can do, when animated by malice—had she considered that Percy, from his conceit, which made him credulous, and his want of principle, to keep him out of danger, would be a very easy victim.

"Your father has aged very much in the last few years!" Isabel remarked to her husband, as she changed her travelling-dress, after her arrival at Burton Lacey.

She had been received with every mark of consideration and honour. Yet her reception had displeased her. It was too demonstrative. She thought that it seemed to proclaim—

"You are the heir's wife now, and we magnanimously forget that you were a tradesman's daughter." Old Mrs. Farr's greeting had given Isabel most satisfaction; Mrs. Farr had always been her friend.

"I think he does look older. He is an old man, you know. My mother was fifteen years younger. What are you going to wear, Isabel? There are to be some people here to meet us," Percy said.

"That is a great pity. Your father does not look fit to have to entertain company. He seems very feeble."

"He would have them asked," Greville said. "Everything must be according to rule. I shall like to see you at the head of his table. Be as lively as you were at Moor Hall; you charmed everyone there."

"Did I? But I am tired to-night. I wish we were to be alone." She sat down before her dressing-table and looked at herself—her white face and the dark violet rings round

her eyes. How was she to be lively to-night?—at Burton Lacey, where so much reminded her of the most painful passage of her past—of the most shameful, as she now felt it.

Percy was gazing out of the window, whistling low to himself.

"A very pretty place! and may be much improved!"—he said presently. "Shall you like living here, when it is ours? Eh! Isabel?" He turned to her, but did not like the expression of her face.

"I'll go and look about me a little. You'll be down soon, I suppose," he said, and walked away without waiting for an answer.

"Your wife is very much improved, Percy!" Mr. Blanchard remarked to his son the next morning. His eyes had been following every movement of Isabel's quite affectionately.

"How? I don't think—I mean ——" and Percy seemed confused—"I wasn't aware that she needed improvement!"

"There is more softness and suavity in her manner than there used to be. Her behaviour to me is most gratifying to my feelings—it is so gentle and—hum—dutiful! I think your wife is very much improved, Percy."

"I am glad she pleases you, Sir."

"I do not think that she looks in strong health. You have not taken enough care of her, perhaps, Percy—led too gay a life."

"Oh! Isabel takes care of herself!" Percy answered laughing, rather bitterly.

"I have no doubt," Mr. Blanchard proceeded, taking no notice of the interruption, "no doubt whatever that the air of Burton Lacey and the quiet of country life will be very beneficial to Mrs. Percy, and I should like you to make up your mind to settle down here for some time to come. I have a conviction, a—hum—in short, presentiment, that I shall not last much longer; and it would be a great comfort to me to have your wife's society and your own for the short remainder of my life."

"I'll speak to Isabel!" Percy said. "But I don't know, Sir, why you should fancy yourself—ha—not likely to live for years."

Isabel was quite willing to accede to her father-in-law's desire, and make Burton Lacey her home for the present. So it was settled. Percy tried to amuse himself as well as he

could, but found the country dull. The Longs did not come, for the baby was ill.

Isabel was spared to spend a few days at Wrangham with her father, at a time when Mr. Blanchard had rallied a little. Percy took the opportunity of going to London on "business," leaving his wife at Caiston on his way, fetching her on his return. This visit home was a very trying one to Isabel. Mr. Wold was not satisfied with her looks, and was so tenderly watchful of her face! He was not to be deceived by the lively manner that she had assumed at Moor Hall. She could not pass with him for a happy, contented wife now; but he was too prudent to question her. Miss Erlridge came only twice to Wrangham while Isabel was there, and Rose and Ellen Blanchard accompanied her. Isabel, on her own responsibility, promised that the girls should be sent for home, if their father became worse. At present Mr. Blanchard had expressed a wish that neither his daughters nor his young sons should be called from their studies on his account.

Isabel's uneasiness under her father's solicitude made her really and evidently glad to see her husband, when he came to take her back to Burton Lacey. And Percy, during this first separation since their marriage, had missed Isabel sorely. To be with her, in that great-windowed room at Wrangham Manor, reminded him of old times—of happy times: especially he remembered how Isabel had once voluntarily touched his forehead with her lips, as he pleaded for her pardon there.

"Do you remember?" he began, on the evening of his arrival. Then he again prayed her forgiveness, of many an ill word and deed of which he had repented during the days and nights of separation. It was a soft autumn twilight, and Percy spoke very gently and lovingly. They were alone. Percy knelt by his wife's chair, and put his arm round her: he longed to have those lips voluntarily pressed upon his brow again.

And they were. "Oh, Percy, it is I should ask forgiveness!" Isabel thought, and she let her cheek rest against his a moment.

They did not hear Mr. Wold enter.

When Isabel looked up and saw him, she was glad that he had come; she knew that his heart would be lightened by his having been a witness of this little scene.

"I have been fanciful!" he thought, as he returned from

seeing them off for Burton Lacey. "My Isabel was too true a heart to marry for anything but love. Certainly her husband loves her; if he is weak, and not all she hoped, she will look after him, no doubt, and will not see the faults so apparent to others."

Mr. Wold and Miss Erlridge talked hopefully of Isabel when next they met; and Mr. Wold wrote good tidings of her to Richard.

When Percy and Isabel reached Burton Lacey, they found that Mr. Blanchard had altered considerably during their short absence. He now kept almost entirely in his own room.

CHAPTER XLIV.

GONE!

MR. BLANCHARD continued for many weeks in about the same state. One day Percy came from an interview with his father, in a very ill humour, and, of course, sought his wife. Mr. Blanchard had been asking inconvenient questions about his expenditure, and the state of his finances—whether he was at all in debt?—adding, "You always were careless, Percy; but I thought your wife would keep you right now."

Percy had learnt, too, that his own portion, though an eldest son's, could not be very large, as there were five others to provide for; that is to say, not so large as Percy had imagined it would be, and not so large as was needful to enable him to pay his debts, and live in the same style that he had done.—He found Isabel directing her maid in moving her possessions into another part of the house, and giving orders to Mrs. Farr for different alterations in the arrangement of the rooms they had occupied.

"What's the meaning of this! What are we turning out for?" Percy was ready to quarrel with anyone about anything. At the entrance of the young master with that cloudy face, Mrs. Farr and the maid prudently retired.

"Clara is coming to-morrow, you know, Percy."

"What of that? I don't mean to turn out for Clara."

"I wish her to have these rooms; they used to be hers, and they are more convenient. They have a sunny aspect, too, and are proper for her baby." Isabel spoke authoritatively.

"Her baby! To turn me out for a baby! What absurdity! There is plenty of room in the house without our being disturbed."

Isabel paused in her occupation of collecting the trinkets scattered over the dressing-table, and looked at her husband.

"You may look, Madam! You have made a great *show* of obedience and meekness lately—this time I will really be obeyed. You can have your things replaced; we don't move from these rooms. Clara can establish herself at the other end of the house. It's all nonsense about this being more convenient. I will not move."

Percy left the room, banging the door behind him. Isabel did not stir till Mrs. Farr re-entered. "Should she obey?" she debated. "Was it her duty to do so? As I gave him no love, I must pay him the more strict obedience," she decided.

"My husband does not like changing his room, Mrs. Farr. He does not know anything about children, you see, and fancies that one room will do just as well as another. Will you have good fires kept up in the north rooms?—then I hope Mrs. Long will not find them cold or damp."

Isabel evaded the old lady's sharp glance as she excused her husband.

Mrs. Farr knew, from Isabel's tone, that no more was to be said about the matter; but, though it was hard for a Blanchard to do anything wrong in her eyes, and though Mr. Percy was the eldest son, she could not refrain from muttering that the young master gave himself grand airs already; and that it was hard upon "Miss Clara" and her delicate baby.

Isabel had taken great pleasure in arranging Clara's old rooms and preparing them to receive her. Now she went away, sick at heart, more grieved than there was need to be. She went to sit with Mr. Blanchard; she generally spent a great part of the day with him now. Percy amused himself, was a good deal at Alderton Park or in Caiston, very little at Burton Lacey; and Isabel had quiet, lonely days, and seldom went out anywhere.

A woman can be only temporarily and comparatively self-contained and self-sustained. At this time Isabel's whole nature, soul, heart, and conscience, were thoroughly awakening, after a long period passed in more or less profound torpidity: to attach herself to something had become a passionate necessity.

Mr. Blanchard, who was now very feeble, dependent, and grateful for any attention, found a wondrous tender and devoted nurse in Isabel, and he filled a large blank in her present desolate life.

Percy had once dared to commend his wife for her *politic*

devotion to his father. He did not soon forget the look which replied to that speech of his, nor did he soon forgive the utter scorn it expressed: he had recoiled from it, as from the thrust of a sharp weapon—the weapon of that keen scorn had then entered deep into his wife's own soul—that she should so angrily despise her husband.

It did Isabel good to see how her father-in-law's face brightened at her entrance to-day. He had been greatly upset by Percy's ill-humour. Greville was away, and Isabel was even more welcome than usual.

Mr. Blanchard had not forgotten his elaborate courtesy, and Isabel was obliged to take the easy chair opposite his own, though she would rather have sat by the window, somewhat out of sight; for the old man's eyes often perused her face with a sadly-intelligent scrutiny that was painful. Those eyes were more sincere now, and more quick-sighted than they had been: for they were turned from life, and often strove to contemplate death.

This afternoon Mr. Blanchard was more talkative than usual. He wished to forget the annoyance that Percy had given him; so, unfortunately, he entered into no explanations with Isabel about her husband's position and prospects, and she herself had no curiosity on these points to prompt her to ask for any explanation. Mr. Blanchard's thoughts were much with his wife; he talked about his days of courtship, and early married life, and the infancy of his children.

He spoke of the beauty and promise of a little girl whom they had lost at a tender age—an Isabel, of whom Isabel had never heard before.

"Had she lived, she would have been just your age, my dear, just your age—a year younger than Percy. Percy and Isabel! The names seemed strangely familiar whenever they were accidentally joined before you became my son's wife. Percy and Isabel," the old man repeated musingly.

Isabel sat at work, listening and speaking by turns, glancing up affectionately now and then. Presently she felt Mr. Blanchard's eyes fixed upon her earnestly—she met them full of serious solicitude, and saw a shadow of anxiety over his face.

"Is anything the matter? Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"My daughter, are you happy?" Mr. Blanchard asked abruptly. The tone thrilled to the poor weary heart. Isabel bowed her head into her hands. Silence followed.

Mr. Blanchard broke it to speak timidly and reverently of the hopes and consolations of religion. Timidly, reverently, mournfully, regretting that they were not more definite realities for him, and asking how was it with Isabel. She could only answer vaguely, evasively, and despondingly; she felt with pain that he turned from her disappointed.

"Speak of those things to Greville," she said softly.

Again a long silence—the autumn wind moaning wildly without.

"I think I shall sleep a little before Greville comes home," Mr. Blanchard said, after a while. "Go to your husband. Poor Percy! I vexed him."

Isabel adjusted his pillows; he said feebly, "God bless you, daughter! have patience. You have been a good daughter to me. I shall sleep. Now you go to your husband."

Isabel pressed her lips upon his cheek. She stayed a little to collect her work and to shut out the rich-coloured sunset-light that was creeping across the room towards the old man's chair. He seemed already asleep when she glided away. His head did not rest upon his pillows; it was stooped forward and leant upon his hand. She met Greville outside, and told him that his father had just fallen into a doze.

Isabel went to her own room. "Go to my husband!" she thought, "with all these emotions, desires, passionate longings, striving in my soul! No, no! I must be alone!"

She put on her bonnet and shawl and went out, down to the terrace where the wind blew straight from the sea.

She paced up and down there, and her thoughts came ever faster and wilder. She had not been out for days, and the fierce wind was an intoxicating excitement; she battled with it, setting her soul's strength against her body's weakness.

There was a glaring gorgeousness in the sky. The wind drove the clouds about, and seemed to strive to blow out the sunset's fire, only to succeed in kindling a fiercer blaze.

As Isabel paused and gazed upon the wild-flying clouds, eagerly as if striving to pierce to the beyond—the glare of the sky falling upon her upturned face, the wind swaying her slight, closely-wrapped form from side to side—all the power and passion of her nature was roused, and mingled in one longing cry; the cry of her soul forced its way from between her lips—"Lord, let love save me from this death in life! Give me children, that they may save my soul! My little

ones are among thy angels; let them come down, let them come down to me! Oh, Lord, let love save my soul!"

The words spoken, she recoiled, startled and shuddering. They sounded so strange and terrible—so daring! She would have recalled her desperate petition. To her excited fancy it seemed as if cherub faces looked down upon her in sorrowing affright.

"Am I going mad?" asked Isabel.

She sat down and covered her face with her hands, shaking and sighing. "Where shall I turn? What shall I ask for, or not ask for? What I pray as a blessing will be given me for a curse, for I am not worthy, I am not worthy!"

She rose: she went through the wood where there was no path, heedless of brambles and clinging branches. She went through the wood into the steep, stony lane, and climbed up and out upon the open moor. She stayed there till all the light was gone from the west, and it would have been dark but for the moon that toiled through the troubled sky.

A sudden sense of superstitious fear of this loneliness struck Isabel as she looked round and found that it was night. A kind of horror of herself and of her late wild prayer was upon her. She went down the lane as if pursued, and plunged into the wood. There the wind alternately shrieked wildly or moaned mournfully, as sudden gusts swept from the sea and died away. The trees were still half clothed, but the wind seemed to find savage delight in tearing off the leaves and sporting with them.

Isabel found the broad path which led direct to the house. The moon was clear from clouds just then, and the way was light, but into the wood on either hand she did not look as she hurried on.

She felt a sense of great relief when, as she turned a sudden corner of the wood-path she saw some one advancing from the direction of the house to meet her—a sense of great relief, and yet she shook from head to foot; all her nerves seemed to vibrate.

It was not Percy, no; nor Greville. It was her father-in-law, walking slowly and feebly. Isabel did not feel any surprise; nay, she even forgot how strange it was that he should be out at all, still more, so late, and on so wild a night. "They have grown anxious about me; I am sorry he has come to look for me," she said to herself, and tried to hasten her steps.

But it seemed as if her body felt a fear that her mind did

not recognise; she shook so, and when she tried to speak, to attract his attention and say that she was coming, she could not.

He did not appear to see her, he leant on his stick, his head was slightly bowed down, and he advanced slowly. They would meet in a moment unless he turned into that narrow side-path.

The wind was quiet now, not a leaf stirred. Isabel should have caught his footfall. They would meet in a moment; still she shook and could not speak.

Suddenly her strength failed her; she sank down upon the ground. She felt that some one—something—went by her—that words were spoken which she failed to catch. Her eyes had closed, then her senses abandoned her.

She lay just at the entrance of the narrower path. How long she lay there she never knew. When she came to herself, she was quite alone.

She looked along each path, to see only black shadows and white streaks of moonlight. The wind rose as suddenly as it had fallen, and shrieked up to cowering Isabel. It took her a long while to creep to the house. When she reached it, she was speechless still, and was shaken by violent shudderings at intervals. The door stood open; Mrs. Farr met her in the hall, and came up to her hastily, to recoil from her involuntarily. Isabel tried to speak, pointed to the wood, and after many efforts said, "Your master," holding open the door, which Mrs. Farr tried to close. Isabel noticed the old lady's strange look—the servants huddled together in confusion—saw Percy coming towards her, then fell, just as she was endeavouring to reach him, and make him understand. He caught her in his arms.

"Mrs. Farr! Greville! some of you—for God's sake, see to her! I cannot; I am not fit! I shall go mad!" Percy cried distractedly.

Greville took up Isabel in his slight, boyish arms, and laid her on a sofa in the nearest room. Percy followed them, like one in a dream. He took no heed of his wife, but fell on his knees, burying his face in her dress, and cried—

"Oh, father, father!" He was deaf to all remonstrance.

"He must be taken away, Mr. Greville," Mrs. Farr said, as she removed Isabel's bonnet. "It might kill her to hear him crying like that when she comes to. I think, Mr. Greville, that she *has seen him*," was added in a whisper.

Isabel's form was still—her shudderings quieted: it was

her husband who shook the couch with his sobs and filled the room with his cries. He was not to be moved; so Mrs. Farr and Greville disengaged his wife's clothes from his clutch, and carried her away.

"I know it," was all Isabel's answer, when she regained consciousness, and they gently told her of her father-in-law's death.

"I know it," she repeated quietly, sitting up.

Then she rose, saying she would go to her husband. "Go to your husband!" seemed to sound in her ears: her own words only echoed them. They let her go. Percy was still kneeling, still sobbing. Isabel shut the door and went to him. "Percy!" As she spoke, she remembered how, in that very room, years ago, she had tried to rouse him from self-indulgent grief, after his mother's death—how she had then turned from him in scorn of his selfishness and weakness.

But now he was her husband—she laid her hand on his shoulder, called him dear "Dear Percy," in a gentle tone that should have been answered otherwise than it was.

He shook off her hand with an unmanly petulance, and would not look up.

Isabel could not stand, so she sat down on the couch by him. A little while she waited silently, many expressions flickering over her eloquent face.

"He is my husband—he is in grief and trouble. I am his wife!" so she reminded herself. Yes, it was her duty to console. How? when she could not do so with her love.

"Dear Percy, speak to me!" she whispered. She bent over him and put her arm round him.

"You are come at last, then," he said, half sulkily; but he grasped the little cold hand that was round his neck, and did not let it go.

Then again came the cry—"Oh, father! father!" and he buried his head in his wife's lap. So they remained a long time—Isabel in a constrained and painful attitude. The room was dimly lighted by one candle which Mrs. Farr had brought in. Isabel sat opposite the window; with excited eyes she watched the flying clouds, the waving trees—and when a long branch of a creeping rose was torn from its support and flung across the panes, she turned sick with fear: fixedly she watched, feeling as if, her eyes removed, that form would surely darken the panes. Isabel was cold, faint, utterly ill; her shivering fit recommenced: but there, a dead weight upon her knees, lay her husband's head, and she would not

move or complain. It was fear that kept her from again losing consciousness; fear of taking her eyes from the window.

After a long time good Greville came; he insisted on Percy's allowing Isabel to leave him, and consigned her to Mrs. Farr's charge. He staid with his brother all night.

Percy's grief was wild and stormy—it was remorse as well as grief that troubled him. He had been violent with the old man, had parted from him in anger; this was a bitter recollection now, and Percy felt both resentful and remorseful.

Mr. Blanchard had apparently died in his sleep—yet not quite a natural death. His elbow had rested on his chair, the hand that supported his head had pressed upon his throat; and it was believed that suffocation had been the immediate cause of death to the feeble, helpless, old man.

Next morning came Reginald, Clara, and their child. Too late! Yet Reginald Long was sorely needed to relieve the over-tasked Greville, to control Percy, to receive the four poor children summoned home from school too late.

Isabel never once spoke of what she had seen in the wood that night; but it was long before the recollection of the mystery of that weird night ceased to haunt her. She found comfort, not unmixed with awe, in thinking, "His spirit was with me at the last to bless me, and bid me be patient."

CHAPTER XLV.

REST.

PERCY would not stay at Burton Lacey. Self-indulgent as ever, he declared himself unfit to attend to anything. He should be quite useless: all arrangements must be made by Long and Greville, he would leave everything in their hands. He must get away from Burton Lacey—home!

Everybody said that Isabel was not fit, after the shock she had sustained, to undertake so long a journey. Mrs. Farr was vehement in her remonstrance, and even Mr. Long sternly reproved Percy in private; telling him that he was selfish and inconsiderate. Of course, Percy was only the more bent on getting away, and on having his wife all to himself again; Isabel only required change, and the journey would do her good, he said. He must leave Burton Lacey, where everything reminded him of his father, immediately.

He and Isabel left the very day after the funeral: she had been quite passive during all discussion.

Percy felt aggrieved when, the day after their arrival at home, Isabel was too ill to be able to keep about, spite of her efforts to do so.

Why should Isabel be ill? it was he who had suffered bereavement, who needed caring for, and required sympathy, and he resented the infringements of his rights.

But Isabel continued to be an invalid all through the winter. Percy sometimes upbraided her with making no effort to rally, expressing his belief that she could get well if she only tried: but she was so pre-occupied that she did not always hear what he said; he had lost his power to make her angry, or indignant, she would smile meekly and lie still. At last he felt that it was no use to fret and complain, to teaze her to try to do thus, or go there. "I cannot, Percy," was

invariably the quiet answer, from which was no appeal. Formerly she would have made any effort he required of her without caring what harm it might do her; now she took heed for herself, as there was no one to take heed of her.

The house was certainly very dull for Percy; he sought amusement away from home. The Mellishes entertained great compassion for him, as a young man burdened with an invalid wife; they and their set did their best to divert him.

As spring came on, Percy began to perplex himself about his wife. He could not doubt that she was really ill. The expression of her face sometimes awed him—she looked happy, after such an unearthly fashion.

He was sufficiently uneasy about her to stay at home more and watch her covertly. Sometimes her eyes would meet his with a new expression in them; she would seem about to say something—he dared not ask her what. His uneasiness changed to fear as time went on.

One morning, an April morning—Isabel had violets in her bosom, which Percy had picked for her—she lay on the sofa as usual, only drawn close to the window instead of to the fire: to-day she was weaker than ever, and she looked the paler for the black dress she wore. As Percy sat near, pretending to read the morning paper, but really watching his wife intently, an interpretation of her serene patience presented itself to him sharply and vividly.

Isabel had been working; the delicate lace and muslin lay unheeded now; her thin hands were folded; she looked out till a ray of mild sunshine fell upon her face, then she closed her eyes and smiled faintly.

Her face was so thin and white, that, with the sunshine on it, it did not look like a face of flesh and blood; the smile faded and the eyes continued to be closed. Great fear fell upon Percy; his eyes caught sight of Isabel's Bible lying half under the pillow; he knew that this morning, and often before, she had been reading it when he entered.

"She is going to die. Oh, God! and she is glad to die!" The paper in Percy's hand rustled as this thought struck him.

He put it by, and crept noiselessly nearer to his wife. He could not see that her bosom heaved, or that she showed any

sign of life. Her eyes opened when his head intercepted the sunlight.

He could not hide all his late apprehension—she put her hand on his, and said—"Poor Percy!" faintly but tenderly.

"You've been asleep," he said; his voice was harsh, because he tried to be unconcerned.

"No! only thinking."

"Of what?"

"Of something I have been wanting to tell you for a long time—you ought to know."

A flush came into her cheeks as she said this.

He was kneeling by her now; her thin fingers fluttered upon his shoulder, and every touch thrilled through him. He could not speak, and she went on—"I was afraid to tell you. But you must have guessed—I have lain here so long! I hoped you would speak first."

"Isabel! you are not going to die? You must not—you shall not! I say you shall not!" Percy broke out passionately, clasping his wife in his arms, and burying his face on her bosom. Isabel was faint; he agitated her and she could not speak directly. Presently he looked up, "You are not going to die! Say you are not, Isabel!" he demanded fiercely.

"Not if it please God to grant my prayers and spare me," she said softly. "I hope to live, to be a mother and a better wife to you, Percy; if only you will love it, it will be a blessing indeed—Percy! you will try." Such wistful eyes gazed into his face! He seemed to gather her meaning slowly. He let her go, and rose, ashamed of his display of passion, almost expecting to hear the taunting laugh, which had often mocked any show of his love.

"Thank Heaven that is all!" he said, striving to recover his self-command and to speak lightly. "You'll be all right again then, by-and-by. You frightened me with your white looks and solemn words."

He kissed her hand and left the room: going away to hide emotions of mingled relief, annoyance and embarrassment. "If I'd said anything it would have been sure to have been just the wrong thing," he repeated to himself as he paced up and down the garden, smoking.

Isabel turned from the light of the sunny spring day and sobbed herself to sleep. What had she expected? What hopes had she been cherishing during these last weeks as

she noticed Percy's occasional solicitude? Why did she now feel such an aching sense of loneliness and disappointment?

Most complete loneliness was Isabel's now. Percy, relieved of his late uneasiness about his wife, felt shy and ill-at-ease with her, conscious that he had in some way disappointed her; but the opportunity for atonement did not present itself.

Isabel preserved a profound silence about her new thoughts and hopes. Percy was away from home more than ever. His wife did not love him, and seemed perfectly content and happy in herself, he said. Of what use was his staying at home?

It was only occasionally that any sense of loneliness troubled Isabel. She lived in a fair-pictured future; her outward, present life was the least real thing, and seldom occupied her attention.

Love was the light by which to read the book now often in her hand, and she began to have glimpses of its Divine meanings.

Mr. Blanchard's expressions of want and regret had impressed Isabel; his last words she often pondered deeply; she did not care whether she had dreamed or not on that wild autumn night—vision, or apparition, she had still received a sign.

The goodness that had granted her passionate prayer penetrated to her deepest heart. At the thought of it she trembled from sense of utter unworthiness, and said, "according to Thy infinite mercy deal with me, oh Lord!"

In the summer a child was born to Isabel: a little weird-looking maiden, holding life, at first, on feeblest tenure. Isabel's joy drew breath tremblingly; she hardly dared clasp her happiness to her breast least she should find it nothing, the shadow of a dream. But she had no agonies of apprehension; she felt assured that her prayer was indeed answered, that her soul was to be saved by and through Love.

Yet after Percy's first visit, Isabel's quiet was changed to pain and fever; and it was long before he was again admitted to her room.

He amused himself as well as he could, believing himself to be a martyr. When Isabel was down-stairs again he did not stay at home much more. She seemed never at ease unless

the baby were in her sight, and only quite content when it was in her arms. It was very delicate and fretful, and annoyed Percy by its low crying, the sound of which penetrated to Isabel and brought the flush to her cheek and pain into her eyes, even when, to please Percy, the child had been taken to the nursery, and the doors shut between. How should Percy know what agony of pain his inconsiderate remarks upon the baby's ugliness and sickliness inflicted?

"My child will know no father's love!" Isabel would think; her sensitiveness exaggerating his apparent want of feeling, which at first was partly caused by mere awkward bashfulness.

But Isabel's heart had ever been a sealed book to her husband. How should he know that this little baby-hand could open and teach him to read it?

As weeks and months went on, Isabel's child grew stronger and more baby-like. The old look at which Percy had mocked, disappeared; the tiny limbs and face became plump and fair; the mother's eyes found beauty after beauty in her little daughter.

Very eloquent were the letters she wrote to her father now; they brought tears of joy into Mr. Wold's eyes. At the least word of invitation he would have journeyed south to see his daughter and her baby; but Isabel would not invite him, lest he might learn the answer to the question he often asked—"And is your husband very fond of his little one?"

Isabel's happiness in her child made her peculiarly beautiful at this time; her whole nature was wakening and softening; her youth was renewed and crowned by a perfection that enhanced all its charms; her baby's hand smoothed out lines worn by suffering and ill-humour.

Percy triumphed in his wife's renewed beauty; he wished that it should be seen by his friends, and thought Isabel unkind and obstinate when she refused to accompany him to late assemblies, or to places of public amusement. The quiet firmness of her manner of refusing irritated him excessively, and she would seem hardly to hear his angry invectives; the most they could extort from her was a sorrowful look, a sigh, or "I am sorry that I cannot oblige you, Percy." Then he would leave her, well aware that he and his anger were immediately forgotten.

As "everybody" was out of town, these altercations were fortunately not very frequent; yet they were frequent enough

to develop in Percy feelings of hostility and dislike for the child, whom he regarded as a successful rival.

Isabel shut her eyes as much as possible to all that was not fair and holy in the Present, and to the threatening aspect of the Future: on the whole, this was a time of rest and peace; looked back upon, later in her life, it shone out a very oasis of calm.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"MY PUNISHMENT IS GREAT."

"PERCY, could we go to the sea-side for a little while?" Isabel asked, one early autumn day. She spoke timidly, because she had the matter much at heart, for her child's sake; and to ask anything for it, was often to be angrily refused.

"You wouldn't go to Brighton when the Mellishes were there, and I wanted to take you."

"You know that I could not."

"Would not, you mean. Well, I think it is very slow work here: but watering-places are expensive, and money isn't plentiful with me. Suppose we go to Burton Lacey?"

"That is such a long journey, unless we went to stay there till the spring."

"Not altogether a bad notion. We could give up this house—the rent is enormous. You and I might come to town when we chose, leaving all encumbrances at Burton Lacey."

To that Isabel said nothing. She had a great wish to live at Burton Lacey altogether, but Percy's last speech frightened her. Would he expect her to leave the child at such a distance?

"I believe I know some one who would take this place off my hands directly," Percy said, meditatively.

"Directly! Oh, Percy!"

"I thought you wanted to go away."

"Yes; but ——" Isabel was pained at the thought of so suddenly leaving a place now endeared to her.

"Could you leave in three days' time? We must do that, or remain here till the spring."

"Mrs. Farr does not like to be hurried. We could not go straight to Burton Lacey. We might stay at Wrangham for a little while, Percy?"

"You shall go on there with the child, Isabel, and I'll

follow you. That will be a good plan : I am glad you thought of it."

"That is not what I thought of, Percy," Isabel said, looking at him.

"Indeed! You need not make any pretence of wanting me with you—of wanting anything but the child. I have learnt my lesson perfectly at length, and don't expect anything of that kind. I know now that my presence or my absence is a matter of indifference to you. No, not indifference, for you prefer my absence."

Isabel answered, with eyes drooped upon her work—

"I make no pretences, Percy. But when I take my baby to my old home, I would rather that my husband were with me. I think it would be better for us to travel together. So I will give up the thought of going home; papa will come to me instead."

"I see! Your pride makes you anxious to keep up appearances."

"Not only my pride, but my love for my father. I cannot bear that he should be unhappy about me."

"Plenty of love for a dog, a baby, a father—none for a husband! You must keep to your first plan, however: go home, and I'll follow when it is convenient to me to do so."

Isabel rose soon after, and went up to the nursery. The baby was ill and fretful this sultry morning. It was an ill-educated baby, too, and expected to be almost always in its mother's arms; it was so tiny and frail still that no other cradle seemed meet for it.

Isabel took the child now, and paced up and down the room, singing to it very softly, till it fell asleep. She had sent the nurse away, and then sat rocking it in her arms and thinking. The angry flush that her husband had brought into her face faded, and her eyes brimmed over with tender joy as she thought of how soon she might put her baby into her father's arms.

The nursery-door opened noisily; Isabel started, and the child started too, and clung to her.

It was Percy.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mellish are down-stairs, and I said I would bring you down," he began.

"I cannot come. I have sent nurse out, and ——"

"No excuses! We have other servants, I suppose. It is your confounded pride! Because you don't like Mrs. Mellish, what right have *you* to be so particular? Here!—

let me put the child down, and you go and smooth your hair."

"You shall not touch it!" Isabel cried, hastily.

"That *is* good! Put her in the cradle, then, and be quick. I daresay the Mellishes are laughing now, thinking there's a matrimonial squabble going on. Never mind, so that they see I am master!"

Isabel knelt on the ground, disengaged the baby's hand from its clutch of a ribbon she wore, and laid it softly on the pillows. But it woke, and began to scream violently. Isabel took it up, clasped it tightly to her breast, and turned to Percy.

"Percy, I am sorry, but I cannot and will not go down!" she said, still gently.

"That is a lie! You are not sorry! But you shall repent; I'll bring that pride of yours down! That child shall not always be in my way!"

Seeing that it was useless to persist further, Percy put himself in a passion. He banged the nursery-door with a force that shook the house, made the sensitive little one quiver in Isabel's arms, and caused Mr. and Mrs. Mellish to smile at each other significantly.

Isabel's tears began to gather and fall when she had quieted the child—cruel tears they were!—tears of humiliation and remorse. The bitterness, the greatest bitterness of the curse she had brought upon herself began to tell. This was the father she had given her child!—her child would suffer, and all its sufferings would have been brought upon it by the mother! "Oh, Lord, pity me! for my punishment is great," was now to be Isabel Blanchard's frequent cry.

As she wept, the sound of light laughter and of merry voices floated up to her from the open drawing-room windows; also she heard music. Mrs. Mellish was trying her piano, bringing from it a storm of sound, then a shower of sharp, brilliant tones; Mrs. Mellish was an accomplished mechanic in music. Those keys were profaned for Isabel—she never touched them again. It was long before she heard the visitors depart; her husband went with them, and he did not return to lunch or dinner.

In the cool of the day, Isabel ordered the pony-carriage, meaning to drive out with the nurse and baby. She was told that Mrs. Mellish had borrowed it; and by-and-by, from her nursery window, she saw that lady dash by, driving Mrs. Blanchard's beautiful grey ponies, and chattering with great

animation to Mrs. Blanchard's husband, who sat beside her. Mr. Mellish was behind. Percy glanced up at the house.

"This is part of his noble revenge!" Isabel muttered, bitterly. She contented herself with the air of the garden.

Percy did not come home till past midnight; then he told Isabel that he had lent the pony-carriage to Mrs. Mellish for the present, and that Mrs. Mellish was kind enough to take their piano of them, and wanted it to-morrow; that she was to give up the idea of visiting her father, and they would go straight to Burton Lacey together, as soon as he found himself sufficiently disengaged. "It is very likely that the Mellishes will take our house; if so, we may be able to arrange to board with them when we come to town," he concluded.

CHAPTER XLVII.

LIFE AT BURTON LACEY.

IT was not till late in the autumn that Isabel and her baby were allowed the purer and more bracing air for which both were languishing. During those weeks that she was detained in London, Isabel was subject to many slights and humiliations. She bore them with a kind of penitent dignity, which Percy felt to be beyond measure aggravating.

Greville came from Moor Hall, where he had been living since his father's death, to receive his brother and sister-in-law at Burton Lacey.

His presence put Percy on his best behaviour, and Isabel experienced the benefit in her husband's altered conduct. Percy was really ashamed of himself, yet he would not say so to the proud woman who did not love him. But, removed from many evil influences, he resumed some of the manner of early married days in his intercourse with his wife. Even when they were alone, the influence of Greville's quiet deference was visibly reflected in Percy's subdued tone.

Could Isabel but have met these advances with love—wifely love—love that should have veiled all his errors and short-comings—thrown a glamour over all his deeds and words! But no! she could be kind, calm, patient—only *not* loving! And love is the one sole safeguard of married life—the one thing that can ward off all ills that assail its peace—all dangers that threaten its purity—that can turn its prose into poetry, and give its poetry wings to mount to heaven's gate. And Isabel did not love her husband, Percy never forgot this. So all peace was hollow, all harmony transient.

Christmas-time found Burton Lacey fully tenanted. Reginald Long, his wife, and two children—Isabel's father and Miss Erlridge—Rose and Ellen, grown into young ladies, Walter home from college and Henry from school—these made a merry household.

And Isabel was the mistress and hostess. She was treated with such respect, love, and admiration by her various guests that her husband, always influenced by those about him, returned to his early belief in her surpassing beauty, grace, and dignity, and resumed his old devotion.

The child, too, named Alice after Mr. Wold's mother, was the pet of the numerous aunts and uncles, and was considered a miracle of beauty and promise, most especially by Uncle Greville, who would hear no word against its perfections. Percy, not indifferent to appearances, began to find it necessary to take some interest in his little girl, to know what colour her eyes were and her hair, whether she had cut one or two teeth, and so on—nay, in this home circle, in this thoroughly domestic party, he was known to have had the child in his arms—to have let it grasp his brown curls. Isabel had grown so cautious where her child was concerned that she veiled the gladness which had better have appeared.

Mr. Wold had reason to be satisfied with his daughter's position at this time, and again the fears he had at sundry times entertained vanished. Isabel gave herself up to the present. No one could look at her calm eyes and brow, hear her low-toned voice, watch her gentle ways, and doubt that, for the present, she was at least at peace.

Her manner to Percy even satisfied the observant Mr. Wold. It was not demonstrative, but it was solicitous, and Isabel had always been reserved.

Miss Erlridge had never felt her beloved pupil so *safe*. Though she did not think much of the chances of earthly happiness in Percy Blanchard's keeping, and was not, being a woman, so deceived by the outwardly fair aspect of things; yet she felt Isabel safe, believing that her peace was anchored on the only Rock, and that her heart was satisfied by the happiness of maternity.

Isabel and Clara had many long talks. There were many things now of which they could talk safely. Their children stood between them and the past. It ceased to be strange even to see Reginald Long sit with one arm round his wife's waist, the other controlling the merry antics of his baby boy, conversing easily with Isabel Blanchard—no shadow of memory between them!—no consciousness that each had possessed a deep secret of the other's, rising up to embarrass them

Undoubtedly Reginald Long was now a happy man. He was happy in his home—a wise father and a good husband. He

was useful in his day and generation—moderately successful in his schemes—sometimes blessed by the realisation of his aspirations. Some of his early ambitions had, perhaps, been buried in the grave of his first love. Some had died for want of the stimulus that had looked out of Isabel's eyes, when she startled him, saying, "Did you ever put your whole energy into any effort, Mr. Long?" Probably, had Isabel been his wife, the world might have heard more of him; but what more or better could he be than happy? and Reginald Long never doubted that he was happy—most blessed. There was no need for others to doubt this, surely. And in his day and generation, within a somewhat narrow circle round his home, he did his work. Perhaps he valued rest and peace almost unduly now, and stooped more than was needful to the intellectual stature of his wife; but he was happy—he hoped to see his natural energies develop under happy and holy auspices in his boy.

One evening, in the fire-light hour, Reginald, Clara, and their children sat together by the fire. Isabel was at the piano, her baby on her knee. Her cheek rested upon its soft hair, as she played softly one of Mendelssohn's gentlest melodies; for little Alice had been discovered to have a great love for music, and would sometimes stop her angry crying to listen. The boys and girls, and some guests of theirs were amusing themselves in another room, and their merry voices reached the more sober elders. A wintry wind whistled wildly without.

Percy entered abruptly, startling all musers. He looked round the room searchingly.

"Do you want me, Percy?" Isabel asked, rising.

"No, no, stay there! Long, I want you—I couldn't find you. What do you sit in the dark for, good people?"

"It is so pleasant!" Clara said, taking the boy from Reginald, folding her arms close round him, and glancing at little Mary playing at her feet.

"Everyone to his taste!" answered Percy, and went out with Mr. Long.

Isabel left off playing and sat down by Clara.

Involuntarily she clasped her baby closer. It was rocked by the rapid beating of its mother's heart.

"Is anything the matter, do you think?" Clara asked.

"I do not know," replied Isabel.

"It is just post time—only letters to talk over, perhaps," Clara suggested.

"Perhaps that is all." Little Alice began to cry. Isabel bent over her, soothed her, then let her sit up and stare at the fire, as she loved to do.

"Percy shouldn't come in in such an abrupt way! He has startled you—you are shaking!" Clara said.

"I am foolishly nervous."

"Percy has been extravagant, Reginald says; but you don't think there is likely to be anything serious, do you?" Clara asked in a whisper.

"I did not know—No!—" (that would be too great a betrayal of the want of confidence between her husband and herself.) Isabel changed her sentence and said,

"I am not afraid of anything in particular—I only think I am more happy than I deserve to be, and so I dread some change."

And there came a change!

The atmosphere of Burton Lacey was not the same after that evening. Reginald and Percy were evidently not on good terms next day—restraint crept over all the members of the family circle. Isabel's guests left her earlier than she had expected they would; and she was hardly sorry when they were all gone—for she was weighed upon by a presentiment of evil that made it difficult to appear to be at ease.

When all his guests had departed, Percy gave way to his ill-humour. He declared that the quiet of Burton Lacey was intolerable—that he was bored to death.

"What is to be done, Percy?—What would you like to do?" Isabel asked.

"Suppose I ask a favour—you'll grant it, of course?" sneered Percy.

"If it is in my power to do so."

"Will you come to London with me?"

"Now?—at once?" asked Isabel, with a look of horror.

"Now! — at once! — to-morrow!" Percy answered doggedly.

"And baby?"

"There it is—'and baby!'" he repeated, mocking her.

"But, Percy, you know that a long journey during this severe weather might kill her!"

"Leave her behind."

"That is impossible."

"Oh yes! I know it is quite impossible for you to make any sacrifice for a husband whom you do not love."

"Percy, I will make any sacrifices that I may!" Isabel

said with tearful earnestness—"any sacrifices not inconsistent with my duty to the child God has given us!"

"Very fine!—I know what *words* are worth!" answered Percy. He strolled to the window, and looked out over the dismal prospect of fog and snow.

He muttered presently—"Any man is a fool who marries a woman who tells him, even before marriage, that she doesn't love him! I have learnt that."

Isabel winced—her cheek burnt with shame, or anger—but she rose, followed her husband to the window, and said solemnly, "And any woman who marries a man she does not love, is a great sinner. We have both learnt a lesson. You have committed a foolish act, and I a most sinful one; but let us each strive to atone. I will do all in my power to make you happy, Percy." She looked at him with tearful pleading eyes, but he would not meet them.

"If you take up the lecturing style, I won't answer for the consequences; I get enough of that from your friend Long," he said roughly, and shaking off the hand she laid upon his arm, he went to the fire-place. Old Wolf was lying there dozing; he was in Percy's way, and, as usual, received a kick.

Isabel opened the door and sent the dog out; then she resumed her seat and her work. She could not help thinking, with a thrill of horror, that had the cradle been there, on the hearthrug, in his way, it would have been quite as likely to be kicked as the dog. Percy's temper grew more violent daily, and he did not strive to control it.

"*I* shall go to London to-morrow. Sir Wilton is going; I shall join him," Percy said, presently adding gloomily: "If I get into mischief there, Isabel, remember it's your fault. You refuse to come with me and take care of me. A fine 'angel in the house' you are, though you pretended to admire that poem so much, when Long read it; and though you acted up to that character all the time we had visitors here."

Isabel was blind with indignation; her needle only went into her own fingers; for an instant, she was inclined to give way to her feelings, to let her husband know how she was thinking of him, to repay his scorn by keener scorn. Instead, she said—

"If you will wait for milder weather, I will go with you, Percy. It is February now, you know, and the cold will not last much longer."

"I daresay! If I did wait you'd find some fresh excuse

then. No! I shall go to-morrow, and leave you to enjoy my absence. That is what you really wish."

Isabel fled from the room, to her nursery, ever a safe refuge for her, even from most familiar fiends—pride and anger.

Percy kept his word, and went to Alderton Park next day, from thence to London.

His wife led a lonely life for months. She resumed her old studious habits, only she studied now with a purpose—that purpose the future education of her children; her little girl was her only companion and her sufficient solace.

She heard from her husband very rarely; he had always hated letter-writing. In all letters that reached her, was something to arouse her anxiety. Clara wrote, "Reginald is vexed at Percy's being in London again, and hopes you will soon join him."

When the spring was fully come, Alice seeming well and strong, Isabel wrote to her husband to know if she might join him; telling him that a few months later she might not be well able to bear so long a journey.

He answered, that he should return to Burton Lacey soon, and could not afford to have an establishment in London just now; he told her that she must stay at home, and be economical, as he had met with unexpected and heavy losses. He bade her not mention this last piece of intelligence in writing to Clara. Greville was in London, too, he said.

The last news was welcome to Isabel; for all else she was too content to stay at Burton Lacey.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PERCY'S VISIT.

ISABEL would have been very happy in this quiet life at Burton Lacey had it not been for a vague expectation of ill overshadowing her, when she remembered her husband's threatening words; for an ever-present and humiliating consciousness of the falseness of her position—a wife content to be separated from her husband—a mother having no love for the father of her child.

Summer reigned at beautiful Burton Lacey. Little Alice's birthday came and passed, and still Percy stayed away. The child throve wonderfully now, and grew very lovely, though always remaining small and fragile-looking. It was never out of Isabel's sight for many minutes together: when Isabel went out, Alice went with her; if Isabel were busy, or not well enough to be out, the child played on the lawn before the drawing-room windows, or its nurse kept it amused in a corner of the room where its mother was; it always slept in her chamber.

"What am I, that Thou should'st entrust this precious gem to my keeping? How shall I thank Thee for Thy goodness, Father?" was often the cry of Isabel's heart as she gazed on her fair little one with an intensity that brought tears into her own eyes and wonder into the child's. "Percy must love her if he were to see her now!" she thought, and, so thinking, almost desired her husband's return with her heart as well as with her reason. One sultry August evening, Isabel came in faint and languid; she had walked further than usual, trying to meet with a cooler air upon the open down.

"Put Alice to bed, Mary, and I will come up and see her presently. I must lie down now," Isabel said. She entered the drawing-room with her usual noiseless step. It was dusk, and she went towards the window to draw up a blind.

Percy was stretched on the sofa, his face buried in the pillows.

"Percy!" Isabel cried, her heart standing still with apprehension.

He sprang up at the sound of her voice, and came to her. "Are you glad to see me, wife?" He took her hands and looked into her face; his was very worn and haggard.

"Yes, Percy; but you startled me, and—are you ill?"

"No! only tired! And you *are* glad to see me. I would I had come to you sooner."

"What is the matter, Percy?—tell me! Something has happened!"

"Nothing! nothing! I have come direct from Paris, and I'm quite knocked up with the journey. Don't be fanciful—there's nothing the matter. I believe I was asleep when you spoke to me just now."

"From Paris! and I thought you were in London."

"Have you seen Greville?" Percy asked quickly.

"Not for a long time—not since January."

"Oh? he has been in Paris, too! and Percy laughed a reckless kind of laugh. "I fancy he is still there, looking for me."

He drew Isabel down beside him on the sofa, and put his arm round her.

"Let me look at you, Isabel. Well, I have not seen a prettier face for many a day." He kissed her. Isabel shrank inwardly from his embrace, but strove to give no sign of her instinctive disgust at something in his whole look and air. "I need not ask if you are well," Percy added, noting the flush on her cheeks—a flush which pain had brought into them. "You are handsomer than ever, Isabel."

"You should see our Alice, Percy! She has grown so pretty!"

"Go and fetch her—I should like to see her. Why are you shaking, Isabel? You said you were glad to see me, but you shrink from me as if ——"

"Your coming startled me. I have been so quiet here that I have grown nervous. I will fetch baby at once, before she goes to sleep."

Isabel was glad to leave him for a moment, to collect her thoughts, her strength of endurance and of self-command.

She soon returned with Alice, prepared for bed, and wearing only her little white night-dress.

"It is papa, baby, and you must kiss him and love him," she was saying. "Poor papa has been away—Alice must love him now he is come home."

"Your mother will teach you how!" Percy said roughly, and took the child from Isabel, spite of its frightened clinging to her dress. It turned from him with most decided aversion; he did not give it up immediately, and Miss Alice began to scream and scold.

"You are strange; she does not know you, Percy," Isabel said, apologetically. "Mamma must teach baby better."

"Mamma has taught her admirably!" Percy sneered. "She is her mother's daughter, Isabel! There! take her."

Weary and heart-sick, Isabel toiled up the stairs with the child, trying to soothe her; she stayed with her as long as she dared.

Returning to the drawing-room, she took her place by her husband's side again.

"Baby will soon get used to you now, Percy," she said. "Remember how long you have been away!"

"I don't know that I shall give her the opportunity of getting used to me. The child shares her mother's feelings for me, and hasn't learnt to hide them. Don't teach *her* to be a hypocrite, Isabel!—Have you heard from the Longs lately?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, several times; but I have not written. Clara asked a great many questions about you, Percy; some of them I could not answer, and was ashamed to say that I could not; others I thought you would not wish me to answer. So I did not write." Isabel looked at her husband steadily and enquiringly.

"Humph! Very prudent and praiseworthy! You needn't fix those eyes of yours on me so. What is it? Am I altered? What do you expect to find out?"

"You look very ill, and I am sure something is the matter. Tell me—I have a right to know."

"A right to know!" echoed Percy. "What right, I wonder?"

"Am I not your wife?" Isabel asked humbly.

"It is only a wife who loves her husband can talk about *right*. You do not love me!"

Isabel shuddered visibly, and said, her tone growing passionately earnest—"Percy! if you knew how your words hurt me, how I repent, you would not reproach me! I am not proud now: I am changed—humbled. I am ready to confess that I deeply wronged you—that I have defrauded you of the best thing of your life, a wife's love—that I can

never make you amends. I pray God's pardon daily, and I will pray yours; Percy, forgive me!"

She was on her knees before her husband. "Forgive me, and for our children's sake trust me," she said. "Husband, trust me, and let us begin a new life together." Isabel on her knees to him! Percy looked bewildered, stupified.

"I didn't expect this kind of thing from you," he exclaimed. "Get up, Isabel, pray! What is the matter? I don't understand. I thought you'd too much sense. There!" He raised her up and kissed her. "I'm not angry! I'm not sorry to find you a mere woman after all! Just hide those tears, though—here's the man coming in with the supper-tray. You see I made myself at home, and ordered what I wanted."

Percy rose and walked the room, talking to the servant, whose entrance had been a great relief to him. Isabel bent her head low over the work she had hurriedly taken up, and drove back her passionate penitence and her rising scorn deeper down into her aching heart. When the servant left the room Percy glanced at his wife apprehensively, but she approached the table, talked to him calmly on indifferent matters, and attended to his wants scrupulously. He made a hearty supper, and did not notice how deadly white her face was now, or how she pressed her hand upon her heart every now and then.

She talked to him, and amused him, till she received his gracious permission to go to bed.

"I'll just smoke a cigar and follow you," he remarked.

There was no sleep for Isabel that night—she had been too much agitated. She wore out the night in prayers and tears, or, when physical and mental pain would no longer allow her to lie still, in pacing the room.

Next day she was miserably ill; but she kept about, unwilling to do less than her utmost possibility to please Percy now that he was at home again.

Percy wanted her for this or that all day long. He had no thought or consideration for her, and allowed her no rest; he could not bear that she should be out of his sight, but kept her with him constantly. She was afraid to refuse to comply with any wish he expressed.

One morning he was going to a distance to superintend the felling of some timber. He was sure that a drive would do Isabel good, and she did not say nay. When the spot was reached he left her resting on a log; returning some

time after, he found her stretched upon the ground, to all appearance dead.

He was frantic then. Isabel was conveyed home. For days her life was despaired of.

But again a child was born unto her, and her life was spared. This time it was a "son and heir." Heir to what?

Percy was very proud of having a son. He soon began to show great interest in the baby.

He said that it should be named after him, and that he would have it brought up after his own heart.

The boy seemed stout and healthy; its father rejoiced in the encomiums lavished upon it, and declared that it should have a different rearing from that of the puny, whimsical little morsel of a girl; it should be *his* boy.

He said this to Isabel laughingly and good-humouredly, but she could hardly smile. She clasped her baby closely, as if shielding it from impending harm. She had so desired some sign of a father's affection for her poor little Alice—now she feared, because her boy seemed to have found the way to his father's heart.

Isabel shed many tears and breathed many prayers; much bitterness and apprehension mingled with her mother-joy. Her faith trembled, and fear prevailed. Woe to the mother who must think of the possibility of having to shield her children from their father!

When Isabel was down-stairs again she found fresh matter for anxiety. Percy received many letters, and these affected him variously—sometimes producing fits of sullen despondency, sometimes of hilarious excitement. None of these letters would he show to Isabel—he was angry if she questioned him concerning them.

Isabel had been forbidden to hold any communication with Moor Hall for the present. The Longs did not know that Percy was at home, or that the baby was born. It grieved Isabel to let Clara's last, loving, anxious note remain so many weeks unanswered. She fancied it her duty to pay Percy unreasoning and scrupulous obedience as far as possible in everything—that is to say, where her children's happiness and well-being were not concerned. She found a kind of sad satisfaction in mortifying herself while paying this obedience—feeling as if she so made partial expiation of her crime, of which she ever thought more seriously and remorsefully.

One blustering October morning, Isabel sat by the fire

nursing her baby. She held a little hand against her lips, watched the tempest-tossed trees with sad eyes, and mused so deeply that she started when he entered.

"Well, Isabel, I think I shall play truant again now for a little while," he said, cheerily. "You're all right again, are you not?"

Isabel gave him a startled look, then glanced down at the tiny face upon her bosom.

"You needn't be frightened—I'm not going to ask you to come with me this time."

"Would you take me, Percy, if I wished it?" Isabel said.

"Take you! You do not want to come," he replied slowly. He looked confused, yet his eyes brightened.

"If you will take me I will go with you," Isabel returned.

"But the boy?"

"I will manage. The weather is not cold yet, and this is a sturdy little fellow."

"Answer me, wife," Percy said, coming nearer. "Why do you wish to be with me?"

If Isabel could have made the simple, wifely answer, "Because I love you!" all might have been well. She might have prevailed now and ever after. She knew this. There was a pause.

"A true answer!" Percy demanded, fixing his eyes on her drooping face. "Why do you wish to go with me?" His voice was very eager.

"I wish it for our children's sake," Isabel answered, mournfully.

"I knew it," cried Percy, passionately. "You wished to play the spy upon your husband—to check his expenses 'for the children's sake.' I know you, Isabel Blanchard. I wasn't fool enough to expect a different answer. No; you shall not go with me."

He finished with a bitter laugh. He *had* dared to hope for a different answer. Isabel had been very gentle, almost tender, and Percy was vain; now he felt madly resentful and jealous. He added—

"Stay at home with your precious children; and I caution you, Madam, avoid all extravagance. Don't spend a fortune in decking out Miss Alice, as you have done, or we may come to be bankrupts and beggars. Money is scarce, I can tell you."

He left the room, and Isabel shed bitter tears over her baby.

Percy was in no better humour when he left home that afternoon. He cherished his anger—shunned all chance of reconciliation. He wished to be able to believe himself an ill-used person ! it made going away easier. He wished that Isabel had been angry and passionate ; for her white, anxious face haunted him reproachfully. She had watched him depart, a thousand dreadful apprehensions crowding upon her. He had looked back to see that face. "But she does not love *me*, or care for *me*," he said to himself, and he strove to forget his wife, with her patient, sorrowful look, entirely.

Little Alice expressed her joy at her father's departure very frankly. In consequence, she received the first harsh rebuke her mother had ever given her—a rebuke which caused her to look in her mother's face with eyes of wistful wonder, and which was followed by tender and impassioned caresses, Isabel murmuring—"All the sin is mine : how do I dare rebuke the child? Oh that all the suffering may be mine, too ! Father, shield these innocents !"

Poor Isabel ! her own prayer mocked her when she thought that she could only suffer through her children ! She could do no more, or better, than strive to lay her cause quietly at His footstool—pray no more, or better, than for power to say, "Thy will be done !"

It was very long before Percy wrote to his wife. When he did, he told her that he had been ill—that he was going to spend the winter abroad—and should have left England before his letter reached her. He gave her no address to which to write—no clue to his destination. He said that she might tell the Longs all she knew about him, and that Greville might rest assured that he was beyond surveillance now ! Percy sent a kiss to his boy, but made no mention of Alice.

Greville and the boys and girls paid a short visit to Burton Lacey at Christmas. Little Alice had a happy time, but every one else felt ill at ease.

That Percy was gone to spend the winter abroad because he was ill, was not nearly all the young people wanted to know. They were sure that Greville knew more, and it was strange of him to make a secret of it. There must be something sad in this secret, they guessed from Isabel's look. Rose and Ellen had left school. It was arranged that, for the present, they should live at Moor Hall. It would have been more natural for them to come home to Burton Lacey, but Isabel felt that Moor Hall was far the better and happier home for young girls.

When Isabel and Greville spoke of Percy, they did not look frankly into each other's faces. Isabel was very guarded and cautious, and endeavoured not to let Greville perceive how little she knew of her husband's past movements and present position. Greville humoured her, and always spoke as if she knew more than he did. Isabel would have no confidant where her husband was concerned.

During this visit Greville did not once speak of his engagement or approaching marriage. He looked old, ill, and sad. He did not stay at Burton Lacey long.

At this time Isabel would pass hour after hour in her nursery, singing old songs to her waking or sleeping baby, and amusing little Alice. Sometimes she sat there the day through. Well she knew each trick of sunshine or tree-shadow upon the nursery walls.

Percy did not come. She did not hear from him again. The winter wore itself out slowly and monotonously.

Occasionally some whispers of the gossip of Burton Lacey reached Isabel, to make her cheek burn, her eyes sparkle—to cause her to pray for patience, and lament that she was still proud. Very rare were these occasions; for Isabel's sad, calm patience rebuked all lightness or malice in those around her. The voice of the world was against her; but she could bear all things while her children loved her and were sheltered by her love.

CHAPTER XLIX.

ANOTHER VISIT FROM PERCY.

PERCY did not come—spring did. After months of anxiety Isabel had another letter. Her husband excused himself for not having written oftener, saying that he should have done so, but that he had been watched. He said, too, that he should sooner have come home, to see her and his boy, but that Long was on the look-out for him—that he could not meet such a confounded prating, lecturing fellow !—so Percy called his true friend, who tried to interpose between him and speedy disgrace and ruin—that it was impossible for him to return at present. There was matter enough in this letter to fill Isabel with fearful apprehension. Why should Percy fear to meet Reginald Long? Why should he fancy himself watched? Day after day, week after week, did she torment herself with these questions.

Another letter, in the same strain, arrived in the course of the summer. In this Percy gave her an address to which to write, bidding her communicate it to the Longs at her peril, saying that he should only wait to get her answer, then go elsewhere. Isabel received no reply to the pleading, passionate words she sent. The summer waned, and no Percy came.

On the third anniversary of old Mr. Blanchard's death—Isabel remembered with a strange chill that it was the anniversary of that day—she, her children, and their nurse were returning from an afternoon walk on the moor, old Wolf following them demurely—a very old Wolf he was now !

It was rather late for the little ones, and they hurried home through the wood—along that very path where Isabel had seen, either with spiritual or physical sight, her father-in-law, on a similar evening, three years ago. Isabel carried Alice, who was tired, and the nurse followed her, carrying Percy. Isabel's thoughts busied themselves with the past, and she

clasped her little girl very closely and tenderly. "My treasure! my firstborn!" she murmured.

She could not suppress a startled exclamation when she saw her husband coming to meet her along the wood-path. Little Alice, startled too, began to cry. Isabel put the child down, and ran towards her husband. It was her husband—no wraith; but he was hollow-eyed, hollow-cheeked, untidy in his dress—no longer like the Percy Blanchard of a few years since. A mere acquaintance would not have recognised him. Wolf barked at him furiously, and Isabel had some difficulty in quieting the dog.

"A pretty reception you and your girl and dog give me!" Percy said, as he kissed his wife negligently. He gave the dog a violent kick with his heel, which sent him howling and limping to his mistress's side.

"You have been so long away, Alice and Wolf have forgotten you, Percy," Isabel said. The child clung to her, too frightened to cry now.

"No reproaches! How is the boy? In arms still—a fine, stout fellow like this! Set him down, girl."

Percy was obeyed; and the boy, of a fine, fearless nature, wanting the sensitiveness of his sister's organisation, ran to his father's extended arms. Woe to the mother who must sicken to see her child run to its father's arms, as Isabel sickened now! Alice was surveying the scene. "Baby not go to nasty man!" she exclaimed presently, and, as if love for her little brother gave her courage, she ran to pull him away. "Leave him alone, you little ——!" Isabel caught her Alice away, or a blow might have been the father's greeting.

Percy kissed, caressed, and praised the boy, then gave it to the nurse. "Make haste and take them in, nurse. It is very cold," Isabel said. And the nurse hurried on before with the children.

"Always shaking and shivering when I come!" Percy said, as he drew his wife's hand upon his arm.

"Oh, Percy! the look you gave your little daughter!"

"I'm sorry; but I don't know how it is, I hate the child—a little, white-faced hypocrite!" He looked suddenly in Isabel's face, and caught its expression of uncontrollable fear and disgust. He threw her hand away. "I *do* know how it is—she is growing like you, and you hate me. I'll pay your hate in hate to her!"

"I do not hate you, Percy—God knows I do not!"

pleaded Isabel passionately. "I would do all—anything—to save you!"

"Yes, for your children's sake—I do not forget—that they may not have to be ashamed of their father," Percy said tauntingly.

"Heaven have pity upon us both!" murmured Isabel.

"Come, come, I do not want to quarrel. I am not at home for long," Percy said.

"Not home for long! Let us go together, then. We can live cheaply—anywhere. We ought to be together, Percy."

"Mrs. Percy Blanchard cannot live cheaply—anywhere. You ought to know that," he answered. "I cannot take you with me."

She had spoken wholly from a sense of duty this time. She would have trembled had her request been granted. What would have become of her delicate Alice, forced to live always with her father? She pleaded no more.

Her early tea was ready when they reached the house. Percy abused such primitive hours. He became more good-tempered when he had eaten and drunk plentifully; but he resented all her attempts "to pry into his affairs." Where he had been all this time, and what he had been doing, she could not learn. He told her that he hoped soon to be able to establish her in London again, in a better position than before, but that till then he could not see much of her, as Burton Lacey did not suit his health or his habits. "And I know you won't break your heart, if I let the children stay with you," he sneered.

"That boy is a splendid fellow!" he added. "I must have him with me before long, even if I'm not able to have you and the girl. Let me see, he's about a year old;" he smiled as he spoke.

Isabel told her heart that he only meant to amuse himself with her fright—that he could have no such cruel intention as that of taking her boy from her; so she took no notice of the threat, except to smile—a very distorted smile.

"I have one quarrel to pick with you, though, Isabel," Percy said, and his face darkened as he spoke. "I commanded you *not* to let the Longs have that address, and you did let them have it—you did! My own wife betrayed me! Well, that's nothing new or astonishing."

"Percy, I did not let anyone have that address—you *shall* believe me!" Isabel looked at him steadily; his eyes fell

before hers, which had none of the now habitual meekness in them then.

"Well, well, say I do believe you. Indeed, I don't think you are a liar yet."

"Yet! What do you mean?" The same steady look.

"Nothing."

"You did mean something—tell me what? Who has been slandering me, Percy?"

"Tush! nobody. But you would lie, on occasion. Any woman would—it's their nature. You would lie for your children now, wouldn't you?"

"Heaven grant I may never be tried!"

"A very pretty way of begging the question. Oh, you are artful, all of you."

"I wonder," Isabel said, with a slow scorn belonging to her old nature, "I wonder where Mr. Percy Blanchard has acquired his exalted ideas of women! They say much for the society he has kept."

"By Jove! that is Isabel Wold again! It's long since I've seen a spark of your old spirit, and I like it." He tried to kiss her. She shrank from him—from the ill savour of wine and tobacco hanging about his clothes; yet more, her spirit shrank from the ill-savour of his spirit. He felt that she loathed his embrace—her husband's—so he repeated it roughly.

Then he sat over the fire, his feet on the fender, his head on his hands, and elbows resting on his knees. So he sat for a long time. It was getting late. Isabel kept her seat at a distant part of the room, watching him from a kind of miserable fascination.

"Have you got any money in the house, Isabel?" he asked presently, without turning towards her.

"Yes; I have just drawn some for my housekeeping expenses. It is not much, for we spend very little."

"Where is it?"

"In my desk. Here!" She brought him her desk, and gave him the key.

"That will do; set it down," he said, taking the key as he spoke.

She obeyed.

"Remember," he added, looking into the fire still, "that in future you are not to draw from the banker, as you have done. Apply to Long when you want money. I have made arrangements."

"Have you seen him, then?" Isabel asked eagerly.

"Do as I tell you, and ask no questions."

"Very well, Percy; but ——"

"No buts; do as you are bid. You women know nothing of matters of business. What's the use of my explaining? You wouldn't understand."

A silence followed.

"Now go to bed," was Percy's next command. "Kiss me first," he added, as she rose.

She obeyed, and went to her room; but she did not undress. She kept her light burning, set the door of the children's sleeping-room open, and sat down by it, listening intently for any noise in the house.

She heard twelve, one, two, and three strike, but heard no other sound; then she fell asleep in her chair. Just at dawn she woke, stiff and very chill. Her first thought was of her children; her first movement to go to their room.

They were safe, the girl and boy, sleeping a warm, rosy sleep.

"Thank God! thank God!" murmured Isabel, bending over the boy.

> "In that extremity of love, will pass
> For agony or rapture."

The nurse awoke, and rose upon her arm.

"Is anything the matter, Ma'am?" she asked, frightened at seeing her mistress dressed as she had been the night before.

"No," whispered Isabel. She kissed the children softly, and stole away, bidding the nurse go to sleep again for a while, as it was not yet time to rise.

Isabel went down-stairs into the drawing-room. The smell of cigar-smoke and of an expiring lamp pervading the room, the empty decanters on the table, the chair close before the fire-place, another kicked over, lying beside it, and the general air of disorder, told of her husband's late presence—that was not a dream! But he was not in the room now. Isabel drew back the curtains, and let in the full daylight. Then her eyes fell upon her desk and a bit of paper lying on it:—

"I'm off. I've got your money. Apply to Long for more —P. B."

Such was the scrawl he had left behind—no clue to his whereabouts—no word as to when he should return.

Isabel threw herself on her knees, and prayed for him fervently. Then before she left the room, she opened all the windows, to purify the atmosphere. Notwithstanding, Alice, when she entered, paused on the threshold, turned up her delicate little nose, said the room was "nasty"—adding, after a pause—

"It smells all 'moky, like papa. Is papa gone, mamma?"

"Yes, Alice," Isabel answered gravely.

"Is mamma angry?"

"Sorry, Alice."

"Why is mamma sorry!"

"She is sorry, very sorry, that Alice does not like papa. Alice must try to make papa love her. She will be a very unhappy little girl some day, I am afraid, if she cannot make papa love her."

"Try to make papa love me! I don't want him to!" the child said boldly, after thinking a little while.

"That is wrong. Children should want everyone to love them."

"But I don't like 'moke," Alice said, after a thoughtful searching about for some reason to justify her indifference to her father's affection.

Isabel turned from the child. When Alice sprang into her arms, tears were rained down upon the bright young head.

Alice was very penitent; sure she had been very naughty to make mamma look so sorry. She promised to *try* and love papa, but sighed as she spoke, as if feeling this impossible. A discovery was made that day, which changed the child's resolution. Poor Wolf was lamed, and otherwise injured, by the savage kick of Percy's heavy boot. He was an old dog now, and he had to be shot. His death and its cause made a deep and dreadful impression on the mind of the sensitive child—an impression which Isabel felt no words of hers could efface or even weaken.

Soon after this visit of her husband's, Isabel discharged all the servants, save Mrs. Farr and the nurse. She caused the long unused carriages to be sold; the horses she had parted with before. One boy was the only out-door servant she retained; he was to do what he could to keep the place in order. All her domestic arrangements were now made with a regard to the strictest economy.

CHAPTER L.

HUSBAND OR FATHER?

PERCY had been gone about a month, and Isabel had received no tidings from him. She was walking on the Burton Lacey road with her children one morning, when she suddenly met her father.

Isabel hardly mentioned Percy in her constant letters home; she always dwelt upon her happiness in her children, and believed that she concealed all her anxieties and fears. What could bring her father here?

Living in constant apprehension of evil, she was easily shaken. It was almost a silent meeting. Mr. Wold looked grave and sad, he drew his daughter's hand upon his arm, and made her lean on him. "It is only general anxiety about you that has brought me here," he said, in answer to her fearful glance; "I have nothing to tell you."

Isabel could smile presently when little Percy was taken and caressed by his grandfather, when Alice claimed a hand and looked up at Mr. Wold's kind face with loving confidence. Since she had become a mother, Isabel's heart had turned more tenderly than ever towards her father; she had longed, with irrepressible longing, to see her boy in the arms of his grandfather—his grandfather! of whom she would teach him to be proud. But her idea of wifely duty had stood between her and her father, precluding confidence.

Now Isabel leant on her father's arm during their homeward walk, and thought how sweet and resting a feeling was this filial reliance. At this time it would have been the truest delight to the once self-dependent Isabel to yield herself up entirely to the guidance of one in whom she could feel sure confidence. Impossible! for she was a wife with a husband who could not inspire any such confidence.

"I see I must not give you any more surprises, my love. You cannot bear them," her father said.

"I was afraid that you might have ill tidings—you have not?"

"No; I know nothing now that you have not known long. You have not confided in me, Isabel," her father answered, sadly.

"Not in you, or in anyone I could not—only in God."

Then they walked homewards in silence. The frugal early dinner was ready soon afterwards. Isabel Blanchard and her children fared very differently from the former wont of Isabel Wold, her father thought. He silently noted the many changes that had taken place since he was last here—things were worse than he expected;—he knew that these changes could not much trouble Isabel, but that the *cause* of them might and must.

The afternoon was spent happily in play with the children. Alice heard wonderful stories about Uncle Richard from her grandfather.

Then came tea, and after tea Isabel went up-stairs with the little ones, and Mr. Wold was left alone to meditate.

Isabel glanced at her father timidly when she came back again—she sat down by the table and busied herself with some useful work: she was afraid that he would now question her about her husband.

"It is very lonely for you, Isabel," Mr. Wold began. "I cannot bear to think of your passing this winter here—so few servants, too."

"It is pretty well known that there cannot be much to steal, papa," Isabel said, "and I do not suppose I shall be alone. Percy may come very soon. He may be home in a few days; he is very fond of his little boy:" as she said those last words, she shuddered slightly.

"Have you any reason to expect him home soon?"

"Not much; but he talked of my joining him in London; he may come to fetch us. I do not know exactly when, and he may alter his plans. I hope he will, for I am afraid that London will not suit the children, after Burton Lacey."

"Your husband talks of your joining him in London?"

"Yes, papa; why not?" Isabel raised her head quickly.

"Because — because, my dear, I do not think that he will be able to fulfil his intention—I mean—you know he has been recklessly imprudent, and ——" Mr. Wold did not tell Isabel how, some time since, before he had been obliged to believe in Percy's worthlessness, he had lent him a very large sum, with which "to make an investment that must prove a profitable one;"—how having done so, with some inconvenience to himself, he had never been repaid,

and had lately received a similar application. He paused now, meditating how best he could say what he had so much at heart.

"I cannot hear you speak about Percy, papa, without telling what is the truth, what I want you to believe—what I ought to have told you long since—that I am to blame for all Percy's sins. I have driven him to it all, papa. I know that the world judges me harshly, but the world is more right than my friends can imagine. I tell you this, that you may remember that all blame you bestow on Percy I take for mine, and I cannot bear that you should blame me very much."

"I will not speak of him, then, daughter, for you must not expect me to believe all this, though I do not doubt that you think it true, nay, even that you have been wrong in some things—you were too proud, my child. Perhaps—but no matter—Isabel, you must come back to me again, with your children. This is what I have come here to say. You must return with me to Wrangham, love; return *home.*"

"*Home!* You forget papa. I can have no home but my husband's house; I ought not to leave Burton Lacey without his permission; I have no right to seek any other home for his children." Isabel spoke resolutely, while she was conscious of sick longing to see her children in a safe and sacred asylum. Safe! that they could nowhere be, if she angered their father.

The time might come when she would be forced to leave Burton Lacey as a runaway—a mother flying with her children to hide them and save them from their father. The day might come—but it was not yet—"Pray God it never may come," she cried in spirit.

Isabel shuddered after her stedfast answer, as she thought such thoughts as these. Her father was intently watching her.

"Come to me for a time—on a visit, my love. Till your husband seeks you, Isabel, my darling! You must—for the children's sake you will! You are deserted—you are absolved from your duty to your husband—you cannot live here alone through the winter."

"Papa, I cannot do as you wish; my husband desired me not to leave Burton Lacey. I am not absolved from my duty. If he should come home suddenly—he may come to-morrow—would he not have a right to be angry to find his wife and children away? It is my duty to obey my hus-

band now, papa; you know it is—you know I am right--you will not ask me any more."

Mr. Wold was silent some time, then he said, "I must wait awhile, I see. My daughter will know that her father's house is always ready to receive her and her children. I shall have you come home to me yet."

Isabel knelt down by him now and kissed his hand; then she let her weary brow rest upon it. Mr. Wold repeated gently, stroking her hair, "I must wait awhile!" adding, as if to himself, "The time will come!"

"Papa, I do not think it will," Isabel said, looking up into his face, catching those last, low words. "I do not believe that I shall ever live at home with you as a deserted wife; for I will not desert my children, I will not lose my children, and Percy loves his boy. What right have I to expect that he shall give up what he loves, to a wife who never loved him? God knows, I cannot live without my children! God will not take them from me—anything but that—anything—anything—to be dishonoured, trampled upon—still I will cling to them—their father will drag me after him by them. Oh Heaven! I could not leave my children! Even if, to save my boy, I fly from my husband, I cannot fly to you, because, if he found them, he could take them both from me! both my children! God will not suffer that—not that!" Her passion of agony had broken out, and her heart was revealed as, kneeling there by her father, looking up into his face, she let those words be forced from her. Now he saw how the bitterness of life might come to her through what had been its blessedness—her maternity.

The poor father quailed as this new light broke upon him. He put one hand over his eyes and groaned. "Child! my child! this is what you fear, and I can do nothing! nothing! God, have pity upon my poor, erring, suffering child! I can do nothing for her."

"What have I said, papa?" Isabel asked, rising and passing her hand over her brow, then kissing him. "Whatever it was, they were wild words—ought not to have been spoken. It will not come to that. But I must be humble and obedient, and I must not make my husband angry, you see. You will not say anything more to me about leaving his house—taking his children from his house—I must not do it—I must be patient—I ought to be patient, for I have had far more happiness than I deserve."

"You are right. No man can stand between a husband

and wife! Only God can deal with this mystery of His. No, my child, you shall judge for yourself; I will not harass you further! We must both of us be patient. We will hope the best."

Both daughter and father after that shrouded their feelings beneath an outward tender quietness: they did not again speak of these matters: before long, Mr. Wold was called home.

Marriage is as dread a thing as death—as irrevocable—as impenetrable and inscrutable—its infinite complications mock finite wisdom and human laws. Only God can judge between the man and woman—know which is most sinned against, which most sinning.

CHAPTER LI.

A BRUTE.

THIS long and dreary winter, too, was at last a thing of the past. Percy did not come home or once write to his wife.

Very strict was the economy now practised at Burton Lacey. Isabel did not apply to Mr. Long for money; she distrusted the nature of Percy's "arrangement" with him; and her father had left her a considerable sum. The children were not allowed to want for anything. Isabel's now skilful needle found constant employment in manufacturing neat and pretty garments for them out of her own dresses. Isabel found no time for study, neither had she any inclination for it; her anxieties and her children sufficiently occupied her mind: but her piano had a place in the room she used daily; and Isabel played a great deal again, because Alice delighted in music, and because she thought that some day this talent might be turned to account for her children's benefit. So the studies and exercises which Leigh Engledew had made her practise were hunted up, and were diligently played over by this changed and worn Isabel: such mechanical performance best suited her burdened mind.

One early spring morning Isabel was sitting at work in the breakfast-room. The large drawing and dining-rooms were never used now, never even opened. Alice, by her mother's side, worked too, happy in the idea that she was "helping mamma!" Young Percy was in his high chair, drawn very close to his mother's, engaged in drawing highly imaginative pictures, for which he constantly challenged the comprehension and admiration of his mamma and sister.

Little Alice, by-and-by, grew tired of admiring, and answered, primly, "I am busy, Percy, and you interrup'." But mamma's patience was inexhaustible, and she gave the young artist abundant encouragement.

Presently Percy, who sat nearest the window, threw down his pencil, and shouted that Uncle Greville was coming. He

insisted on being lifted from his perch immediately. Isabel set him down on the floor. He was a stout, sturdy boy, and looked quite too heavy a weight for his fragile mamma to lift. The child toddled to the door, but soon made a frantic retreat to his mother's side; it was not Uncle Greville who came in just then.

"It is your Uncle Long, Percy! Come and shake hands with him, my boy!" She rose, trembling, though she spoke quietly.

Mr. Long touched her hand, then bent over the boy, who looked at him doubtfully.

"Percy thought he saw Uncle Greville," Isabel said.

"He was right;—Greville is here. Is your husband at home?" Mr. Long spoke as if Percy might just, by chance, be out.

"No, he is not at home." Isabel sat down and bent over her work again; she could not stand.

"We expected to find him here," Mr. Long said. Then Greville came in. They talked about Clara and her children, and played with little Percy, and all the time seemed to be watching and listening. Reginald Long's face wore a stern and resolute expression.

"Have *you* heard from Percy lately?" Isabel asked Greville, laying an emphasis on the pronoun, as though *she* had. Proud still, poor Isabel!

"No, not lately." Greville had too much delicacy to put that same question to Isabel. Presently he suggested that the children should be sent out, as it was a lovely morning, though cold.

Isabel took them from the room, dressed them with trembling fingers, and then dispatched them with the nurse, charging her to take them upon the down—on no account to go near the high road.

Reginald and Greville broke off their conversation when Isabel re-entered.

Spite of her simple, almost mean dress, of a dark-brown stuff, without ribbon or ornament of any kind, Isabel excited admiration. She had her old stately grace of manner, softened and refined by the influences that were softening and refining her whole nature, and made pathetic by the patient sadness of her face. She offered her guests refreshment, but they declined. Then she resumed her seat and her work, and there was a painful silence.

"This is new sort of work for you," Greville remarked, saying an awkward thing, in his determination to say some-

thing. Poor Greville looked ill, harrassed, and very miserable; but he was kind and gentle as ever.

"I like it!" Isabel replied, quietly. "I am growing quite expert at dressmaking, especially in making children's dresses," was added, with a smile. Mr. Long had left his seat, and was looking out of the window.

"Isabel, we have something to propose to you!" Greville said abruptly. "It may as well be said at once. We think it best that you and your children should go to Moor Hall for the present. We want to take you back with us today."

"Why?" Isabel demanded. She dropped her work and looked at Greville somewhat imperiously.

"Your husband cannot any longer be looked upon as your protector—nor his house as a safe asylum for you and your children. It would be better that you should find another home." So answered Greville, with downcast eyes.

"Speak plainly, Greville—tell me all!" Isabel folded her hands resolutely, and looked into his face.

"I cannot tell you all." And Greville's eyes continued to be lowered in shame. "It is not fit that Percy and his innocent children should be under the same roof. Reginald thinks as I do, Isabel—you must leave Burton Lacey."

"I owe duty to my husband—he told me to remain here."

"That will not long be possible."

"While it is, I must remain."

"Percy himself will release you from duty to him."

"Till he does, I will fulfil it as well as I am able." Isabel spoke calmly.

"Percy Blanchard has disgraced his name. All connected with him must feel shame for him. You owe no duty to such a husband, Isabel! He is a criminal in the eyes of God and of his country." Reginald turned from his gazing out to say this sternly.

"Oh, God, it is not so!" Isabel cried, in agony. "Greville, it is not so bad! He judges harshly. It is not *so* bad."

"My brother is a criminal," Greville answered; "to what extent we do not yet know. He is hiding in this neighbourhood, and is about to leave England. You must go to Moor Hall. What is the use of your staying here?"

"I will not go to Moor Hall!" was answered passionately. "It is I who am a criminal. My husband's crimes are mine. It is not for me to feel released from all duty to him because of his wrong doing. In God's eyes I am the greater sinner.

I will not try to be safe and secure while he is in danger and a wanderer."

"What do you mean, Isabel?" Greville asked, pityingly and perplexedly.

"That I will go with him—that we must not live apart any longer; that I must atone; that now all men will shrink from him, I must cleave to him. My marriage vow meant this. I will be faithful to it, Greville."

"For the sake of the children ——"

"He is their father. I have no right to hope to keep them, if I give up my husband. I am not worthy of them if I desert their father." Isabel's spirit quailed, spite of such brave words.

Mr. Long turned round and said, sternly and impatiently—

"You are mad! Stay! you do not know all, and you must. You are a deserted wife, Isabel. When your husband leaves the country, he will not go alone. Does she understand?" Mr. Long asked Greville. She looked from one to the other with such uncomprehending eyes; suddenly she bowed her head. Smitten by an agony of remorse and humiliation, she buried her face in her clasped hands, shut out the light, and strove to think. Oh! bitter thoughts! Surely the extreme torture of such moments might expiate much. As in a vision, she saw her husband as in the days of courtship—handsome, loving, ardent; then, as on his last visit, reckless, sullen, gloomy. Oh, the change!—whose work but hers? She forgot all but her own crime. If Percy had sinned, her pride and her want of love had driven him into temptation. She took upon herself an intolerable burden of guilt and remorse, and groaned beneath it.

Isabel did not know how long a time had elapsed since Mr. Long spoke, when she heard his voice again. "Percy is coming. You, Greville, meet him. It is not fit that she should see him." These last words roused Isabel. She lifted up her haggard face.

"Do not stir, Greville!" she commanded. "I, his wife, will meet him."

She met him in the hall, as she had never met him before. Throwing her arms round him, ready to break into passionate weeping on his breast, ready to fall at his feet, and implore his pardon, that then she might pray for God's—

"Home at last, my husband!" she said.

"It is too late for this sort of thing!" he answered, and pushed her from him roughly.

"Oh, you have company, Madam!" he exclaimed, pushing wide the half-open door—"my worthy brother and your old lover." Reginald and Isabel looked into each other's eyes: hers were full of entreaty, his of stern pity. Percy turned fiercely to his wife. He was a desperate man. "You expected me, you Judas! They lie in wait while you come out to *welcome* me!—you traitoress! you hypocrite!—I do not know, though, what else I should expect from *you!* But I have it in my power to punish you, Madam, and I will! Now, Greville, Long, let me hear what you have to say, and get it over." Percy seated himself, and looked at one and the other with sullen defiance.

"You had better leave us, Isabel," Reginald said. Isabel lingered near her husband's chair.

"Yes—go!" Percy commanded, turning to her menacingly. He had so injured her, that now indeed he hated to see her wild white face.

Isabel went. She sat stupified upon the door-step some time. Then she went out into the sharp March wind. Each blast went through her, but she did not heed it. She found the boy, John, and despatched him to bid the nurse keep the children out till she sent for them, but to do all she could to keep them warm.

Then Isabel sat down upon the door-step again, because it was near the room where the three men were. She quaked, as she heard her husband's voice, ever more loud and passionate, launching imprecations, not sparing her.

Presently she could bear this listening no longer. She rose and re-entered the room.

Her husband turned upon her furiously—told her that she and her spies should repent bitterly. Then he rushed from the room and the house. He pushed past Isabel; but it was not this, it was his words and his look of hate, that caused her to totter and fall.

"We must follow him and see him again—get him to say that he is guilty or not guilty of the *forgery*," Reginald Long exclaimed. "Just get some one to look to that poor creature, and then follow me. For her sake, my wife's, his children's, we must learn the truth—or we can do nothing."

Isabel recovered consciousness to find herself and Mrs. Farr the only occupants of the house. Her demands for her children were so wild that Mrs. Farr was alarmed, thinking they must have been taken away, or have come to some harm.

When Isabel was calm enough to make herself understood, they were sent for, and came back crying with cold and hunger.

To warm them and feed them was Isabel's first care. They were awed and quieted by their mother's looks.

She could not bear them a moment out of sight. She followed their every movement.

They were tired out with their morning's walk, and in the afternoon they fell asleep on the sofa, both clasped round by their mother's arms.

Greedily the poor mother's eyes perused them. Noting each quiver of the long, dark lashes—each rise and fall of the girl's snowy chest—each parting or closing of the boy's full, red lips—daylight failed, but the firelight fell upon them brightly.

Mrs. Farr had left Isabel alone with her children, knowing that they, if anything, could comfort her for the grief, whatever it was, that had fallen so stunningly upon her. Oh! the prayers breathed over them, while they slept their sound, childish, dreamless, or happy-dreaming, sleep! Oh! the tears of concentrated bitterness that rolled down from the mother's eyes!

Isabel felt, at last, as if such passionate, grief-full gazing as hers must trouble them—must penetrate their slumbers and pain their hearts! Her Alice stirred and murmured something about "poor mamma!"

"Bless thee a thousand times, my heart's darling!" Isabel muttered and turned her eyes elsewhere, resolved to look at them no more then.

Her gaze was irresistibly attracted to the uncurtained window. She strove to penetrate the dark without. She could not loose her arms from round her children without danger of disturbing them, or she would have hidden that dreadful blank of darkness upon which her excited, feverish fancy depicted forms of dread terror.

Unreasoning, paralysing fear fell upon shaken Isabel; but she gazed with dilating eyes, clasping her children closer to her panting bosom, yet turning from them in that wild outlooking.

Her tears ceased to fall, seeming to freeze on her cold cheeks.

She tried to will that she would look away from the window. She could not. The darkness fascinated her; still she gazed out, striving to pierce it.

Her heart paused in its beating, when presently a white, wicked face was pressed against the window-pane, peering in, returning her gaze. It was no ghost—worse, worse, far worse! Isabel knew that she was spoken to; but the wind blew and the rain fell in torrents, and she could hear nothing but the storm. The face was taken from the window, and some one rattled the hall-door. Isabel threw a large shawl over the sofa, where the children were—he might not have noticed them—then she went out to open the house-door for her husband.

"Very fine for you to be idling by your fireside, while I was being drenched to the skin!" he muttered as he came in.

"Wind and rain would be nothing to me," she answered, meekly.

"Playing penitent again, as your protectors are gone!" he said, glancing round the dim room. "Ha! ha! finely I gave them the slip. They are pretty far on the wrong road by this time!"

Isabel pushed the arm-chair to the fire for him—gently wheeled the sofa away, back into the darkest corner by the wall. She knelt to pull off his wet boots—said she would find him dry clothes, and left the room. His was the drunkenness of despair—nothing she might do could touch him. He muttered to himself now that she was a consummate hypocrite with her meek face!

She returned with some of his garments, dry, warm, and neatly folded.

"Will you mind putting them on in the kitchen, Percy? No one is there, and that is the only other room where there is a fire." Her voice shook with anxiety. He must leave that room, that she might get the children away!

"I should very decidedly mind. Go into the kitchen yourself, and get me ready something to eat. I sha'n't stir from this room."

"There is a better fire in the kitchen—your coat is airing there—somebody might come here."

"Ho! you are expecting more company, are you? A gay house this for a deserted wife!"

"Will you come this way? There is a light outside!" Isabel held the door open. He was about to comply, involuntarily, when he suddenly altered his mind.

"Give me the things without more fuss—I won't leave this room. One would think you had some one hidden up here."

And he peered round suspiciously; then he took the clothes from Isabel's hand, and shut the door in her face. She stood outside, listening for any sound that might betoken her children's awakening. She had told Mrs. Farr to send up whatever food there was in the house as soon as possible. She thought that Percy would not stay long, as Mr. Long and Greville might return.

When Percy opened the door, to throw his wet garments into the passage, Isabel re-entered.

"Is my food coming?" he asked her.

"Yes," she answered, "but I am afraid there is not much in the house."

"I haven't eaten anything since the morning."

"Where have you been?"

"In the wood. Ah! I gave them the slip finely. They'll fancy I'm off to—What's that noise?" One of the children had moaned in its sleep.

"Nothing! nothing! It is a very rough night."

"A rough night indeed! Ah! Mrs. Farr, glad to behold your master, of course. Come to spend his last night in England at home, you see."

Mrs. Farr curtsied in silent consternation. She could not frame any sentence of congratulation. She gazed at him, a wild-eyed, haggard, desperate-looking man. This a Blanchard!

After Percy had eaten he turned to the fire again.

"What the devil are you listening to?" he asked, suddenly, having transferred his gaze to Isabel's face.

"Oh, Percy! nothing, nothing!" she replied, in a hasty, startled way.

For a long time the husband and wife sat—Percy glowering over the fire—Isabel away in the cold: her chair against the sofa where her children slept. He heard only the roaring and howling of the storm; she only heard the slumberous low breathing just behind her, and every stir of a restless limb.

Presently Percy began to nod drowsily—she watched him as before she had watched the uncurtained window. If he would but fall sound asleep! Her aching eyes should have held him spell-bound by their unflinching gaze. It was like the voice of doom to her—when presently little Percy woke, stretched, yawned, and finally called "Mamma."

She turned sharply round. "For God's sake, hush!" She pressed her hand upon the warm wide-open mouth.

"Eh! what! who's that?" The elder Percy roused up

and rose from his chair. Little Percy sprang up on the sofa, now, threw his arms round his mother's neck, and began to cry.

"It's my children, then! my own children, you've been hiding up from me! I knew you had some cursed mystery, that your meekness and coaxing meant something. Come here, boy, I'm your father." Percy took the child roughly from Isabel, and held him up to the light.

"Ay! ay! you'll do—a fine fellow you'll be, and you'll soon love papa when mamma's away—Ay, my man?"

"Percy will not leave mamma." The frightened, half-roused child struggled and screamed violently. Alice was awake now, hiding her terrified face in Isabel's bosom.

"You there, too, young lady, are you," Percy said, seeing her. "*You* needn't be alarmed, I sha'n't take you away."

Isabel pressed her daughter's face closer to prevent her speaking.

"There take the youngster for the present, I'll soon teach him better." He returned the screaming boy to his mother. Isabel sped away and gave the children to their nurse. She came back and knelt at Percy's feet.

"No nonsense!" he said, "that boy goes with me to-morrow morning. You can't complain; I leave you the girl. You know I might take both."

"I know you might," said Isabel. "Oh, Percy! husband! do not let us part! Let me go with you. I will be your servant—your slave—anything—so that I may still have my children—both my children. God move your heart to hear me, Percy."

"It is too late for any of this stuff. I don't want you or your girl, I can't afford to keep ye. As for the boy, he'll be well cared for, for my sake. Others love me, though you never did, Isabel."

"I will learn—oh, Percy, I *could* learn, if only you were merciful now. Be merciful, as you hope for mercy! As you have need of mercy!"

There she knelt, clasping his knees with her thin hands; searching his face with her passionate eyes. He did not answer immediately—she hoped she had moved him, and poured out more agonised entreaty.

"I am glad to see you in your right place, at my feet, at last. Who would have thought that it would have come to this? Many's the time I've been fool enough to kneel to you: now you kneel to me!"

"Percy, let me keep my children, let them love me still, and I will follow you anywhere—everywhere; be pitiful, husband, be pitiful. I will serve you and work for you, only let me stay with my boy. God deal with you as you with me, husband!"

Percy pulled away the hand which she had taken, pushing her from him, and rose. What to him was the fearful beauty of this wild mother—of this pleading wife, close clinging to his knees. He looked down upon her with eyes that said, "I hate you!"

"No more of this fine acting," he exclaimed, brutally; "it is thrown away. Once you might have turned me round your finger—I hate you the more when I think of those times. I do not want you—stay at home and work, or live on charity, with your girl; my boy goes with me, and you I will not have—nay, not for my slave even. I hate you! Is that plain enough?"

Isabel still crouched down by the hearth.

"It will do you good to be thoroughly humbled at last," her husband said, turning at the door, "so I tell you that you have been living on charity—on my creditors—this long time past. I have spent all I could get, have borrowed all I could get, and have taken where I could not borrow. I leave Greville, Long, your father, burdened with my debts. There, see the proud position you got by marrying where you did not love."

He went away. Isabel heard him call for a candle and tell Mrs. Farr that he was going to bed, and that breakfast must be ready early for him and his boy. Isabel had not risen an hour after, when Mrs. Farr came in to look for her: she was crouching on the ground a dumb, blind, stricken creature.

Mrs. Farr understood it all now; her master's words had enlightened her; she remained silent at first in presence of the mother's anguish.

"That I should ever live to see the day when a Blanchard should come to this!" were her first words. Then she approached her mistress timidly. "Something must be done, Ma'am. The bonnie boy shall not go."

Isabel rose feebly, pressed her hands upon her brow, and looked round in weak bewilderment.

"See if my husband is asleep," she said, presently.

While Mrs. Farr was gone, Isabel knelt and cried, "Oh, Father, in my supreme misery, hear me! Let me save the

soul of my child. Be with me this night, oh Lord! For the innocent child's sake, hear me!" The conviction that to let the boy be with his father, was to ruin him, morally and spiritually, justified the deed she contemplated.

"He is sleeping sound enough. What are you going to do, mistress?" Mrs. Farr said, when she returned, to Isabel.

"To save my boy. Stop—he—he—is in my room."

"Ay!"

"And I can only reach the children through it."

"The other door is locked, and nurse lost the key. 'Twas such a noisy door."

"I remember—come with me, we must lose no time."

Stealthily Isabel crept through the room where her husband slept, the old woman following. She took up her boy, holding him so closely pressed against her bosom, that he could not cry out loud; she told Mrs. Farr to follow her with the girl, and passed swiftly across the chamber.

Percy called out in his sleep, and Isabel's heart gave a wild bound of fear. But she reached the sitting-room in safety, and Mrs. Farr followed. Shut in here, the children might cry—their father could not hear.

Percy did cry with sleepiness and fright—little Alice kept her eyes on her mamma's face, and was very still.

Isabel comforted her boy with loving words and kisses. He was going out with mamma, she told him. Their out-door clothes remained in that room where they had been taken off that afternoon. Isabel dressed them, forgetting nothing, fitting on their tiny goloshes, wrapping them up very warmly. Mrs. Farr assisted as well as the trembling of her aged hands, and the streaming of tears from her dim eyes would permit.

"I am to go, too; you will take me?" pleaded the old woman.

"No. To-morrow, when he leaves, you must go to Moor Hall. They will care for you well there. No one must know where I am gone, I should not be safe if they did. He would find me; he would take my boy."

"Mistress! mistress!" moaned the poor old woman. "That I should live to see this! Out into the wild night, with those little ones."

"For the sake of the little ones God will guard me," answered Isabel.

Isabel had dressed herself, and had put all the money she possessed in her purse. Now she took her stout boy in her

arms, wrapping him round in her shawl. "Alice, darling, you must take mamma's dress, and walk as fast as you can," she whispered, as she went into the hall.

Poor Mrs. Farr was half stupified—"That the Blanchards should come to this—to steal away on a cruel night. Mistress! mistress! have pity upon the children."

"I have pity upon the children. Hush, hush, good woman! we shall meet again some day."

She grasped the old servant's hand, kissed her cheek and left the house.

The wind was wild still; but the rain had stayed. Isabel feared to take the road, and kept in the wood paths, walking as fast as poor little Alice could manage. Happily it was not a dark night; the wind-riven clouds were thin.

"Alice is afraid—there is such a noise, mamma!" the child said.

"It is the wind in the trees. God sends the wind—God will take care of little Alice," Isabel answered. "Could you walk faster, my poor darling?"

"I'll try, mamma."

Presently Isabel took up her little girl, and struggled on a while, carrying both children.

"Put me down! You hurt yourself, mamma! Alice can walk," the child said, frightened at her mother's panting. Percy had fallen asleep, the wild wind his hoarse cradle song.

"We will rest a little." Isabel sank down upon the drenched ground, pulling Alice upon her knee. Fear pursued her, if nothing else; very soon she was up and struggling onwards again.

They went on for what seemed to poor little Alice a long, long time; at last they reached a cottage where an old man lived who had been the Burton Lacey coachman, and was now employed at the Burton Lacey Arms. When he was doubly roused from his slumbers and his stupifying surprise, he was quite ready to do Isabel's bidding unquestioningly. She told him to go to the inn and get a carriage of any description, without saying for whom it was required, and to bring it to the corner of the road as soon as possible.

While he was gone, Isabel made a fire and warmed her children. Alice, too, fell asleep now, her head leaning against her mother's knee. The old man had some distance to go, and had some trouble in procuring a carriage. The time of waiting was most terrible to Isabel. Every time the

wind rattled at the door or window, she clutched and strove to hide her children, fancying that their father approached.

At last she and her sleeping little ones were settled in the carriage. She gave the old man money; he went to bed again, and, but for the golden coin, would have thought that the coming of the mistress and her children to his cottage must have been a wild dream.

Isabel told the man to drive her to Oakholm, a place she had heard of, about twenty miles off, where she knew there was a railway station.

It was morning when they reached Oakholm. Isabel got her children some breakfast at an inn. Then, when she had seen her driver start on his return to Burton Lacey, she went to the station, read the placard of times and places, and took tickets for a place of which she had never heard before, to reach which would take about five hours.

Isabel's heart bounded with joyful gratitude when they were off, travelling rapidly from Burton Lacey. The morning was fair; the sun shone in brightly upon them; the children were no longer hungry, cold, or tired, they looked out of the window and chattered away merrily.

There were only three other passengers in the carriage; one was an inquisitive-looking man, who paid much attention to the girl and boy. Isabel was glad that she wore so thick a veil, and that she and her children were so poorly dressed.

Alice, when tired of looking out, surveyed the carriage and her fellow-passengers. After a while, she said—

"This isn't a nice carriage, mamma; there's only plain wood to sit upon, and its dirty?" and she turned up her dainty little nose scornfully.

"Hush, Alice!" Isabel whispered.

"And you are used to travel in a pretty carriage, are you, lit le lady?" the inquisitive-looking man asked the child.

But Alice coolly turned away from her questioner, and w llingly obeyed her mother's gesture, bidding her come to her other side.

"The little miss doesn't like my look much better than the look of the carriage," the man remarked.

"My children are not used to see strange faces," Isabel replied, and turned towards the window. It was a great relief to her when her sociably-disposed neighbour left the carriage.

"Where are we going, mamma? When shall we have

something to eat, mamma?" the children asked, as late in the afternoon Isabel stood with them on the platform of a little station.

On reaching the end of her first railway journey, she had taken tickets for another five hours' ride. She would have kept on travelling longer, but she was afraid of exhausting her small supply of money.

Poor Isabel! this first question was hard to answer.

"Luggage, Ma'am?" a porter asked, when the train had left.

Isabel shook her head. A fresh difficulty was presented to her.

Feeling comparatively safe now, she had time to think of smaller troubles and difficulties. How strange it would seem for her to go anywhere without baggage of any description—to do this was to proclaim herself a runaway. There came pressing upon her a thousand bewildering doubts and perplexities. Never in her life had she stood thus alone and unprotected; not only unprotected, but having others to protect. That last thought brought courage and resolution.

"Mamma, mamma! I am so hungry," little Percy cried.

"You shall eat soon, children," Isabel answered, rousing herself. "You shall have some dinner very soon."

"Stage for Bardon in one hour, Ma'am. Meets the 'bus for Arthgwynn," the same porter said.

"Thank you!" answered Isabel. "We will go to the inn and be back by that time."

"Red Lion, Ma'am, large sign; this way—across here, and down the street."

"Thank you!" Isabel repeated with real gratitude, and took the direction indicated, down the village street.

She asked for a private room at the inn; saw the children seated at dinner; hunger prevailing over little Alice's dislike of the smell of the dingy room, and the look of the food set before them; then she went out, charging them not to leave the room till her return. She purchased a carpet-bag, small enough to be carried in her hand; then, one after the other, a few necessaries for the children and herself. The bag was full and her purse lightened when she returned to the inn.

Soon she and her poor children were travelling again. How far they none of them knew. That Arthgwynn was in Wales, Isabel imagined; that it was not a place of regular resort with visitors and tourists, she hoped, because she had never heard its name. And to Arthgwynn she resolved to go.

There was no one else inside the coach, so the children could play and chatter unchecked: Isabel could ponder undisturbed.

When they had travelled about three hours, the country through which they passed grew very beautiful. Isabel looking out towards mountain ranges, and getting an occasional glimpse of a blue, sunny sea, having her heart full of gratitude to God, as she listened to her children's voices, might have dreamed of—ay! even of happiness, in a simple life of hard work for her babes, had it not been for the memory of her husband—an outcast, an evil-doer, a desperate man, whom she had wronged, whom she had just robbed of something he valued—of that last deed she could not repent yet.

Tears of heart-wrung remorse came slowly down Isabel's cheeks. God was good. But how had she deserved such infinite goodness, the possession of these treasures. It might be she was yet to lose them! Oh Heaven, no! Involuntarily she looked out, back, for the pursuer. There lay the long stretch of gravelly road, golden in the afternoon sunshine, or black in the shadow of pines, silent, solitary; nothing travelled that way. "Truly the wicked fear when no man pursueth," said Isabel.

The world was too bright, too fair for Isabel, when the thought of her husband, of his sins and suffering, darkened her spirit. She was a runaway wife—a disgraced woman—an unworthy mother.

She turned from her outlooking: but then her eyes fell upon her children, fairer even than the sun-steeped hills and sea, pure and innocent natured. "According to Thy grace, not according to my merit, hast Thou dealt with me, oh Lord!" So Isabel thought, and rested upon this conviction. Truly she needed rest.

CHAPTER LII.

A REFUGE

IT was near midnight when they reached Arthgwynn. Isabel gave her children their supper and put them to bed in a clean, but tiny room. She had engaged the first lodging recommended to her; its great recommendation to her being that the woman who kept it came to her with a baby at her breast.

Now she sat by the white-curtained bed, watching her children's sleep, and trying to think what was to be done on the morrow, and for many another morrow. But her brain refused to think, and utter and desperate weariness came over her heavily. She could just pull off her dress, and throw herself on the bed. Then she slept an untroubled sleep.

When she woke, it was broad, bright day. She lay some time striving to recollect where she was, and why?—what had happened?—how she came to feel so weak and powerless.

The children! they were not in their bed.

She sat up with difficulty, and looked round. She heard their suppressed voices in mirthful talk. They were both on one chair by the window, back from which they had pulled the slight curtain. Isabel's eyes, rising higher than their bright heads, looked straight upon a near and green hill-side, which shut out the sky. She fell back again, still gazing out.

Alice turned presently, and seeing that her mother was awake, lifted Percy down, and they both clambered up on the bed to kiss her.

"My darlings, how long have you been awake?" Isabel asked.

"A long time, mamma! We didn't want to wake you, you looked so tired!" Alice said.

"But you must be cold, dears?"

"No, I've kept Percy warm with your shawl, and I put on

our socks. And Percy's been so amused! There's such a pretty stream out there. It looks so nice here, mamma!"

Isabel got up, feeling very feeble—obliged to lie down once or twice before she could finish her own toilette and the children's.

The hostess, Mrs. Owens, had breakfast ready for them when they went down. Her bright, honest face beamed kindness and compassion upon Isabel, and loving admiration on the children.

"Eh! but I thought you'd be weary this morning!" she said, as she stayed in the room to cut the children's bread and butter, make the tea, and see that her new lodgers had all they required.

"Yes, we came a long way yesterday," Isabel answered. Her eyes had fixed themselves upon Mrs. Owens' face with a wistful, seeking expression.

The woman felt it; she paused on her way out to say—

"Aught me or my man can do to make you comfortable, we'll do hearty-like, Ma'am."

"Thank you, I think I shall need to use your kindness, Isabel answered, humbly.

After breakfast, Isabel asked to have the baby while its mother was busy. It was gladly given into her charge, and its mother's heart was completely won by Isabel's tenderness to it. It was clean and pretty; but if it had been otherwise, this changed Isabel would have liked to nurse it, though then her little daughter Alice would not have been anxious to do so, as she now was. Alice and Percy cast longing glances from the window of the little parlour. They wanted to go out; but Alice strove to amuse Percy, and whispered to him many times that they must not trouble poor mamma, who was tired and ill.

But after Mrs. Owens had reclaimed her baby, and Isabel had sat some time resting, with closed eyes, feeling the sunshine warm upon her, and hearing every whisper of the little girl and boy's, they all went out—first into the garden, then on little by little, the mother following feebly where the children led. The children were full of mirth and delight; and Isabel's grateful heart was gladdened by their gaiety, by the beauty of the scene, and of the bright spring day.

Mrs. Owens' cottage stood rather higher than the little town of Arthgwynn. The town was only to be approached from it by crossing an old stone bridge across the river Arth.

This rough, grey old bridge, with its luxuriant garniture of ivy, lichen, and fern, was a very pretty object in the foreground of the landscape as seen from the cottage. The mountain, Arthgwynn, rose very close behind the cottage: down its clefts trickled many streams to fall into the Arth, which soon bore them to the sea. The music of waters came in at the open cottage casements pleasantly on a sultry summer day, and made itself hoarsely audible in the winter nights, when the streams were swollen by heavy rains or melted snow.

Looking due south from the garden in front of Arthgwynn Cottage, Isabel could distinguish the outlines of five distant mountain ranges, of fainter or deeper shades of purple. To watch their varying colours, the sunshine falling here, the shadow lying there, that sharply defined sweep, and this melting, misty, undistinguishable mass, to fancy how the sea must dash upon the abrupt eastern point which terminated the nearest range, and to wonder what lay in the valleys between each chain, this was employment enough for Isabel during the next few days of idleness and weakness. Between the town and the mountains, there was a tract of flat and uncultivated country, very gorgeous to look upon when the gorse and heather were in bloom, growing more and more barren to the west of Arthgwynn, where it terminated in sandhills, overgrown by rock roses and blue sea-thistles, which the waves strove to reach. This western view was dazzling to Isabel now;—so bright was the glitter of golden sands and blue water, that she could hardly follow the course of the Arth to the sea, though she shaded her eyes with those thin, white hands at which good Mrs. Owens had looked curiously last night.

On the east, more mountains rose, and shut in the town. They also shut out the distance, except where a gap in their rocky range allowed the eye to follow the windings of the Arth awhile through a grand and gloomy pass.

This was the view from the cottage-garden; but by climbing the green steep sides of Arthgwynn to some considerable height, one of the grandest of Welsh views was to be obtained. To the east and south appeared a sea of mountains, their crests lifted high into heaven's light, while valleys of gloomy shadow lay between: to watch a storm gather among them and pass over them was glorious indeed. Yet Arthgwynn was then, and perhaps is even now, unknown to tourists and to fame.

Isabel did nothing to-day but follow her children about, or sit resting on some bank or stone, while they stopped to play. They floated little boats down the stream that ran between the cottage and the hill, in which they had seen the bare-footed children paddling in the morning. They laughed equally whether the boats swam securely awhile, or were wrecked upon a rock in the stream's stony bed. Isabel's head resented any effort to plan for the future.

"Might she take this pleasant place for a home?" Her heart spoke strongly in its favour; but she could not decide this, or anything, at present.

She returned to the house very weary, and found a most welcome addition to the furniture of her little parlour—a queer couch, old, but freshly-covered, and most comfortable. It was doubly welcome for the ease it afforded, and the kind thought of which it testified. Friends, even the humblest and least availing, were very precious now.

Four or five days went away much as this first.

The pure, bracing air, the carefully-prepared and nourishing food (everything was cheap and abundant), above all, the sense of safety, of the children's safety, and of *rest*, which had come down upon Isabel, and encircled her in her new home, gradually repaired the ravages made by late passion, grief, and fear. Isabel, even while her bodily weakness lasted, felt a buoyancy and hopefulness of spirit which she had not known for years; she had a sense of newness in her inner and outer life which she had but once before experienced, for a short time after Alice's birth. "The wind is tempered to the shorn lamb." Verily.

With the power to work, revived the desire and earnest determination. But how? Isabel had several schemes. Pondering over these, anxieties arose, and difficulties had to be recognised. Then came remembrance of how deep a concern all her friends must be suffering on her account, and remorse for inflicting this pain. Fear, too, lest her husband should still be in England—lest search should be made for her, either by friends from mistaken kindness, or by emissaries of Percy's, seeking the runaway wife who had stolen his children from their father. So with strength and energy came both these—remembrance and fear, to ruffle Isabel's repose. How could she hope for any sense of security save that derived from absolute reliance on a Higher Will?

It was not right to leave her friends in doubt as to her

fate. She must do what was right; she must not be selfish. The thought of her father's distress especially troubled her.

She decided that she must set her friends at ease about her, yet that not one of them must know where she lived, unless she could ascertain beyond all doubt that her husband had left England. This she must know any way; now the doubt had been raised, it must be answered. Isabel began to revolve a scheme that it would require all her heroism to resolve to put in practice.

She procured a map and an old guide-book, and succeeded in ascertaining where she was. She had reached Arthgwynn by a very roundabout route she found; that was well. She discovered that she was not more than half the distance she imagined from Moor Hall, but very far from Caiston. To go there was impossible, and at first this was a bitter disappointment. But she reflected upon how hard she might have found it to induce her father to let her depart from his house again alone and unprotected, and then said that this, too, was well.

Mrs. Owens had won upon Isabel's affection; a very friendly feeling was established between the two mothers by interchange of mutual kindnesses. Mrs. Owens had living with her a young unmarried sister, to whom Alice and Percy had taken a great fancy. Isabel began to feel that it would be possible to leave her darlings under the care of the sisters for one day, while she went to Moor Hall.

She had much to tell, much to ask counsel about, and it would be imprudent to establish a correspondence at present. She wished to be entirely cut off from her old world, when she had once relieved the anxiety of her friends.

Isabel preferred that her new life should be one of toil and privation. She did not wish to have anything made smooth and easy. So that her children knew neither physical nor mental want, the poorer they all were, the more humble and hard-working, the better, Isabel thought. She was the wife, and they were the children, of a man loaded with debt and disgrace; of a man who had burdened and impoverished all his relations and connections. She had taken his sins upon herself—she only would not *court* humiliation, because to do so is inconsistent with meekness. Isabel, being thoroughly humbled, did not feel anything as humiliation. She wished to do meekly whatever she should recognise as duty—to go steadily on the right way, looking neither to one side nor the other, counting neither gains nor

losses, accepting her life simply as a fact, not considering its relation to aught else, past or future—save that any blessedness in this present life must remind her of God's all-suffering love and infinite goodness, and of her as infinite unworthiness.

But Isabel was a wife as well as a mother.

The discipline of her life had much to effect—much to teach her yet.

CHAPTER LIII.

ISABEL'S JOURNEY.

"DO you know if anyone is about to buy the music-seller's and stationer's business which I see has been some time waiting a purchaser?" Isabel put this question to Mrs. Owens one morning. She had been at Arthgwynn a week, and had just "settled" with her hostess for the expenses of that week. Moderate as were all Mrs. Owens' charges, Isabel's purse was very nearly empty now. She was conscious that a slight blush crossed her face as she asked this simple question.

"And it's the shop that was one Mr. Pritchard's you're meaning, Ma'am?"

"Yes, at this end of Iron Street, opposite the bridge."

"And I hav'n't heard any talk concerning it; it'll be unconvenient for the gentry if nobody do. But there's Mr. Thomas, the grocer, do sell writing-paper. Perhaps you're wanting some, Ma'am; it's down town, and Ellen Katharine shall run for you this minute."

"I am wanting some way of earning my own living and the children's," Isabel answered very quietly.

"Ech, then, but I thought——" Mrs. Owens paused, looking much bewildered and confused.

"What did you think, Mrs. Owens!" Isabel asked, smiling meekly.

"Ech! and I was right, howsomever; you're one of the real gentry, anyhow."

"My father was a shopkeeper."

"And I'd never have thought it; but ——"

"I should feel very thankful, Mrs. Owens," Isabel said, "if your husband would get me all the information he can about Mr. Pritchard's business—whether it was a good one—how much he will dispose of it for—what is the rent of the shop, and so on. I think your husband will go to work more wisely than I should."

"Ay, and he's a sharp one, is Owens. He'll be proud to pleasure you, Ma'am."

"And, Mrs. Owens"—here Isabel's voice faltered—"I think I must leave my children here, under your care, while I go to see some friends with whom I must consult. I have never left them before, and ——"

"And, Ma'am, they sha'n't be a moment out of my sight, or Ellen Katherine's," Mrs. Owens broke in compassionately and impressively. "Now, you be easy, Ma'am. They shall be well looked to."

"If I could but take them with me; but they are safer here than they would be with me."

"Safe and sound you shall find them, dear lambs, when you come back."

Isabel looked into Mrs. Owens' glistening eyes, was comforted; and it was only for one day.

"You are very kind to me, who am but a stranger," she said.

"And it's the stranger and them that is in trouble we should be kind to," was the ready answer. "And you've had your bitter grief, Ma'am. I know the look of them that has had a heart full of sorrow—though, thank God! there's no two lovers happier than me and Owens." So it seemed that Mrs. Owens had arrived at a solution of the mystery of Isabel's position—a young mother, wearing a wedding-ring; not a widow, yet apparently widowed!

Isabel bowed her head down upon her hands a moment. It was soon raised, and she said quietly, "I have suffered, but not undeserved sorrow, and I have my children! Your husband will ask about the shop for me to-day, then," she added.

She went to the children, who were playing in sight of the window, feeling very badly about this short separation, though Mrs. Owens inspired her with full confidence. The wildest fears would suggest themselves. Should Percy be still in England, seeking them! if the wolf should, in her absence, enter her fold!

The answers to Isabel's enquiries about Mr. Pritchard's made her think that it would be a possible thing to get a living by keeping this shop.

Early in the afternoon of the next day, Isabel found herself walking up the pine avenue of Moor Hall. She walked quickly, and kept her face veiled. She had come two or three miles from the station on foot, through miry roads and

lanes, and was much splashed and very weary. Her heart sank, and she felt utterly strange and desolate.

She stood on the steps under the great portico a moment or two before she knocked at the door, so many recollections were pressing upon her. When the door was opened she asked to see Mrs. Long.

The servant hesitated. "His mistress was not well," he said, "and he didn't think she could see any stranger."

"Tell her that some one in distress, who is not a stranger, wishes to see her," Isabel answered.

The servant peered at Isabel half-suspiciously, but the quiet sadness of her voice impressed him. Leaving Isabel in the hall, he went away to confer with one of the maids.

While Isabel waited there, both Mr. Long and Ellen Blanchard crossed the hall; each glanced at the shrouded figure standing in the dim corner, and passed on. Ellen Blanchard had been weeping lately, and hurried up-stairs. Reginald's face was stern in grief, and he held an open letter in his hands. This Isabel noted even through her veil.

An elderly female servant came to Isabel after a few minutes had passed.

"If you will come into the nursery, Ma'am, my mistress will see you," she said, and led the way.

Isabel followed up the broad staircase into the room she remembered so well, where she had watched little Mary so long ago, and had learnt to pray for children as for her heart's desire.

Clara sat by the fire, nursing her baby; she too had been crying lately. The other children were out. Old Mrs. Farr was reading her Bible in another corner of the room by a window. When the door opened to admit Isabel, Clara passed her handkerchief over her eyes, and turned towards it. Mrs. Farr looked up over her spectacles wistfully.

"Will you come near the fire?" Clara's sweet voice said kindly; and she rose, her baby on her arm, pointing to a chair close to her own. Isabel felt yet more strange and desolate in presence of this fair and gently-dignified matron.

"Do not be startled, Clara," she said timidly, then first lifting up her veil, having ascertained that the door had closed behind the woman who had brought her up-stairs.

"God be praised! it is my mistress!" cried Mrs. Farr, coming forward ready to fall on her knees and give thanks. "The children—the blessed children?" she demanded. Clara laid down her baby, and threw her arms round Isabel.

She too asked "the children?" when she could speak for crying.

"They are at home safe and well."

"At home?—at Burton Lacey?"

"No, no; at our new home. I came because I knew you would be anxious, and because I want help. I did not dare write."

"Help! of course, Isabel. Oh, that fearful night! and you went all through the storm!—where?"

"We none of us suffered from the storm. My children are quite well. Mrs. Farr, what happened after I left?" asked Isabel.

"All was quiet till morning. Then, thank God! you were safe from him. 'Twas the passion of his grandfather that showed in the master. Terrible, terrible it was when he found you gone and your children."

Clara pushed Isabel into a chair, and began removing her cloak and bonnet.

"What has become of him, Clara? Is he gone?"

"We cannot find out; he didn't sail in the ship we expected. The prosecution is stopped; all has been paid. We hope he has gone; but we cannot tell." Clara spoke in a whisper.

Isabel clutched her cloak round her, and started up. "Don't take it off. I must make haste. Suppose," and she gazed into Clara's face wildly, "suppose he should find them while I am away. Not gone! not gone!" she repeated.

"That is impossible. *We* have taken such pains, and could trace you no further than the station at Oakholm. We were afraid to enquire openly, lest that should lead to Percy's finding you. Oh, Isabel! Isabel! we have grieved over you and your children; each of those windy nights I have thought of your stealing away from your home in darkness and cold with those little ones. Oh, that my brother should have brought you to this!"

"Hush, Clara! the fault is mine; but we must not speak of the past—I cannot bear it—and it is the future I wish to talk about."

"Mrs. Farr, will you find Mr. Long, and ask him to come up?" Clara said.

"Do not mention to anyone else that I am here," Isabel added. "Your baby is beginning to fret, may I take it up, Clara?"

"Hold it a moment, while I tell Mrs. Farr to bring up

lunch, and to manage so that no one else comes in ——. You look so changed and ill, Isabel, that I do not think they would know you; still ——"

Clara soon returned, and took the baby, begging Isabel to rest in a low chair, and bewailing her poor friend's haggard, care-worn looks.

"No! I cannot rest till I get home. Will your husband come soon, Clara?"

Isabel wandered about the room restlessly.

"He had gone out; but I have sent after him." Clara's eyes, full of grief, fixed themselves again on Isabel's face.

"So white and thin—Isa! I cannot bear it. But you and the children shall be well petted and cared for soon, when you come to live here."

"That we shall never do, dear Clara."

"Indeed you must and shall. Isabel, you must not be proud and unkind. You must come here."

"What is my wife so earnest about?" Reginald Long asked. He had entered silently, and pressed Isabel's hand; she had not offered it till he held out his own; now he sat down by his wife.

"Isabel says she will not come here to live, Reginald."

Mr. Long turned gravely to Isabel. "Do you really mean to refuse a home here for yourself and your children?"

"You cannot, kind friends as you are, offer my children a *safe* home."

"True!" said Reginald, after a pause; he passed his arm round his weeping wife. "Our sister Isabel has some wiser plan in which we can help her, love," he said in a voice which calmed and controlled Clara.

"We are settled in an out-of-the way village: I have found kind friends already, or I could not be here to-day. I think, too, I have found a way of earning enough to support my children in comfort."

"You do not mean to refuse your relations the small consolation of providing for your physical wants?" Reginald asked sternly.

"I am here to-day to beg for help," Isabel replied.

"That is well."

"It is help to help myself that I want. I must work for my children—it is necessary—necessary for my peace. How could I bear an idle life?"

Isabel told the attentive husband and weeping wife a little about the kind of life she had planned, and what sum of

money she needed to borrow, to begin her world with. She did not tell them all, for fear of paining Clara, and from caution.

"Clara! she *is* right—she is about to act nobly and wisely." Mr. Long rose, saying, "I will get ready all you require; but you will rest here one night—you want rest, Isabel." His tone now confirmed that title of sister he had first given her a few moments before. For Isabel Wold he had lost love and esteem together very long ago. For Isabel Blanchard he had slowly learnt esteem and pity; now he was learning brotherly affection.

Tears of gratitude sprang to Isabel's eyes—but she answered quickly—

"I cannot rest, I cannot rest, till I get home again!" Her eyes were fixed on Clara's face pleadingly, but Clara kept her eyes upon the fire. Clara was hurt at Isabel's independence.

Mr. Long paused at the door. "Clara, love!" he said, half reproachfully.

Those words were quite enough. Clara again burst into tears. Isabel came and knelt at her knees, kissing her baby—softly excusing herself, pleading for Clara's forgiveness of her resistance to her kind desire, saying how much more good they were to her than she deserved!

"But it cannot be—they would not be safe. They are all I have—I must make them a home! I must be all to them—I must work out my penitence; for I have grievously wronged them—I have made them worse than fatherless." So Isabel murmured, kneeling before the blessed, though weeping, wife and mother—blessed even in those tears, which her husband's lips would kiss away so soon. It took much less than such words as these to melt Clara's heart and dissipate her short resentment.

By-and-by, Isabel departed, consoled and strengthened. Her last words were, "And you will let papa know directly, and try and make him easy about me."

The carriage was there at the door, to take her to the station. Reginald offered to go with her; but she gratefully refused to have his company, and even stipulated that the carriage should set her down at some distance from the station—she was so cautious!—and Mr. Long returned to the nursery and his wife. There Isabel liked to remember him, calming poor, perplexed Clara by his wise arguments and his grave tenderness.

When Isabel entered the carriage, she found Mrs. Farr in it. She had taken a secret leave of Mr. and Mrs. Long, and had hastily packed up her possessions. She was determined to share her mistress's fortunes. Nothing Isabel could say could move her from this resolution, short of an absolute command to remain at Moor Hall. This Isabel had not the heart to give.

"Mr. Long did see no harm, and Mrs. Long thought I might be, would be a comfort to ye," was her strong argument.

Mrs. Farr was conscious that the "bit of money" she possessed would keep her from being a burden upon Isabel, and her determination was not to be shaken.

Isabel and Mrs. Farr travelled all night, having a long coach journey after the rail. They arrived at Arthgwynn cottage, just as Ellen Katherine was dressing Alice and Percy. The mother's welcome was sufficient reward for the anxiety she had been in concerning her little ones.

Mrs. Farr, too, was welcomed clamorously; and Mrs. Owens' opinion that, somehow or other, spite of her father's having been a shopkeeper, Isabel belonged to the "real quality," was confirmed by the veneration in which this most respectable old lady held the mistress.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE MUSIC SHOP.

IN June Isabel opened her shop.

Of course the beautiful, though wasted-looking English lady, with her lovely children, and evidently some mystery in her position, had excited a good deal of curiosity in the little Welsh town.

It had been rumoured among the village authorities that she was a certain lady of title, whose domestic unhappiness had been the talk of the world—who had not long before escaped from her husband, from whom she had subsequently been divorced, and who, it was rumoured, had secluded herself in Wales. Great sympathy had been felt for Isabel, and great awe had kept it from being intrusively manifested. Mrs. Farr inspiring almost as much respect as did her mistress, no one attempted to obtain any information from her. Indeed it was only the upper and middle-class people in the place who could speak English, many of these but imperfectly; and they, though intensely curious, were above questioning a dependent—at all events, did not do so—perhaps judging, from Mrs. Farr's austere dignity, that all such questionings would have failed to elicit the desired information.

Alice and Percy, who might safely have been interrogated, were never to be seen without Mrs. Farr or their mother; so for three months who and what Isabel was remained a matter for speculation with the people of Arthgwynn.

It was a great shock to them when Isabel was seen behind the counter of the late Mr. Pritchard, ready to serve them with music, any description of stationery, or even with pins, needles, cottons, tapes, gloves, or stockings, and when, above the door, they read the familar and undistinguished name of Price.

But even now they contrived to construct a romantic story. A certain Ellen Price had left a neighbouring village some years since, having made a "great match." Doubtless her

husband had turned out ill, and she had taken her maiden name and returned to live as near as she dared to the scene of her early life.

For the first few weeks there was a great rush to Mrs. Price's shop. All the town's-folks supplied themselves with stationery, and all the young ladies of the neighbourhood ordered their music through Isabel, instead of having it from the nearest large town, Bingham, as had been their ordinary custom. Isabel was busy from morning till night.

One day a pretty pony-carriage stopped at Mrs. Price's shop-door, and a pretty young lady came in to look over some music.

She was difficult to please; and Isabel brought out the best compositions in her assortment, and tried with exemplary patience to suit her young customer.

"You must know something of music, Mrs. Price," the lady said, pausing from trying over some passages on an imaginary piano, and looking into Isabel's face inquiringly. "Mr. Pritchard never kept anything but rubbish. You have a capital selection."

"Yes, everyone does now," Isabel answered. "I have a piano in the other room, if you would like to try over any of these pieces.

"Ah! that would be a good plan. I am sorry I keep you so long. Are these your children? What a splendid little fellow!" In this back room, which had a window looking over the heathery plain towards the mountains, the children were amusing themselves under Mrs. Farr's care. Isabel only left them at the cottage when the weather was very bad.

"They are my children," Isabel replied, as she opened the piano and placed the music on it.

The lady sat down and began trying over bits of some of Beethoven's sonatas, playing with taste but very carelessly.

"My mamma can play that much better," Alice remarked to Mrs. Farr.

The lady caught the words and rose.

"Mrs. Price, do oblige me. I am sure you will," she said. Isabel played the movements she was requested to play, and the young lady went into raptures. "So clear! so pure! each note heard distinctly! Ah! you make me despair of ever doing these justice. How pleased Herbert would be if I could play like that!"

The lady seemed to be meditating—

"Have you ever given lessons in music?" she asked hesitatingly.

"I never have."

"Would you? Now do say yes! was uttered coaxingly, a pair of blue eyes looking pleadingly into Isabel's.

"I could not go to your house—I do not leave my children."

"Oh, I would come here; I should prefer it. I want to take some one by surprise. It will be delightful!"

Isabel pondered. "I could attend the shop whiles," Mrs. Farr suggested, pleased that Isabel should find what she fancied must be a more congenial employment.

"And I'll be good and keep Percy quiet, mamma!" Alice said, gravely.

"Oh, you sweet little dear!" the lady exclaimed kissing her. "It is so good of you to take my part!"

"What time would suit you?" Isabel asked her visitor.

"Any time you like—early in the morning best, because then I could be home again before I was missed."

"And early in the morning will suit me best, because my customers do not come in then so much. From nine till ten?"

"That will do beautifully! And your terms?"

"I do not know really what ——"

"Oh, then, I will ask Herbert, my brother and guardian, what he used to pay Favelli when we were in London."

"One quarter that sum will be more than I shall require."

"We will see! You are going to give me a whole hour; and I know your time is precious; and you won't ever throw my music at me as he did once; now, will you?"

"No, certainly not!" Isabel answered, smiling.

"And I may come three times a week? I want to get on fast, because we are only at home here for the summer. I ought to tell you who I am, I suppose. Florence Meredith, of Gylwart. Are not these Welsh names hard?"

Florence Meredith then kissed the children, shook hands with Mrs. Farr, thanked Isabel most gratefully, and fluttered into her carriage, to be whirled away by the pretty ponies.

Miss Meredith was a person of consequence in the neighbourhood, and as she proclaimed Mrs. Price's merits as a teacher of music, naming rather a large sum as her charge by the hour, Isabel soon had pupils for all the time she could devote to giving lessons. Her trade in music, too, became something considerable. If "one Mr. Pritchard" had got on

well at this curious little corner shop, one Mrs. Price was likely to do much better. The shop had but a single little room behind it—nothing over it: so that Isabel still occupied Mrs. Owens' apartments. To reach the cottage from the shop, she had only to cross the bridge, ascend a short, stony, fern-bordered lane, then a bit of green hill-side, and she was at her cottage garden gate. She seldom left the children at home. Alice could read stories to Percy, and could play him little tunes. She was always successful in her endeavours to keep him good, though his was a most turbulent little spirit. The boy was very like his father. Isabel, who could not love the child better for this likeness, and had no need to do so, sometimes, as she looked at him, dreamed of a possibility of loving the father for his likeness to the child!

"Alice is a great comfort to mamma!" Isabel said often, tears filling her eyes as she pressed this fair little daughter to her breast. Yet her most passionate love was for that same turbulent-spirited, bold, brave boy, Percy. But now there was never anything passionate in the outward expression of Isabel's emotion. Her love for her children was just her very life, it could be nothing more; and her life in this love was quiet from its intensity. A prayerful patience was now always the aspect of her face when in repose; but sometimes gusts of sudden fear would whiten and agitate it

CHAPTER LV.

THE FUGITIVE.

WHEN Isabel had been in business six months, her profits from her business—larger then than afterwards, owing to the curiosity and sympathy she had excited,—together with what she had obtained by teaching music, enabled her to pay back a small part of the sum she had accepted as a loan from Reginald Long. She resolved to do this through a banker at Bingham, and to post a few lines from the town, assuring her friends of her well-doing, and requesting that any important information about her husband might be communicated to her by letter addressed to B.P., at the Bingham Post-Office. Her desire to know if, indeed, Percy were on the other side of the Atlantic now, was sometimes very importunate.

Altogether, Isabel had a good deal of business to transact at Bingham. She locked up her shop for the day, left her children in charge of Mrs. Farr at the cottage, and started very early in the morning, walking some miles to meet the stage at a cross road, meaning to return late that same night. It was a cold and grim December day. Mrs. Farr bemoaned her mistress's fatigue and exposure bitterly; but Isabel did not care for these things.

When, arrived at Bingham, she was making some purchases at a warehouse, a man came in whom it puzzled her to remember where she could have seen before. She felt that he was surveying her curiously, and she was glad that, from habitual caution, she had not lifted her thick veil when she entered the warehouse.

She finished her purchases, and was asked for an address. It was the first time she had dealt with these people. The man who had been looking at her drew closer, as if to hear what name she gave. It flashed upon Isabel that this was the person with whom she had travelled the first part of the way from Oakholm, on her flight, and whose observance of

her children had then annoyed her. Without appearing to notice him, she gave a false name and address, with as much composure as she could assume, paid for the things, desired that they should be carefully packed, and left the shop. Coming back a moment after, she found the man and the person who had waited upon her, in close conference.

"Blanchard!" the latter was saying, meditatively, "Blanchard! No, I have not heard of anyone of the name of Blanchard, or Wold either."

Isabel gave her additional directions, that her parcel was to be kept there for her, and went away. All her nerves were quivering, and her knees were ready to give way under her;—she went into the next shop, a confectioner's, and sat down to recover herself. The same man passed, peered in, then entered. Isabel took something off the counter, and began to eat. She lifted her veil now, and calmly looked her tormentor in the face, wondering at her own self-control. She sat some time to rest, hoping that he would leave; but he appeared determined to lunch heartily and deliberately. Her next visit was to be to the Bank. She had then several other places to go to; and the omnibus which passed within a few miles of Arthgwynn would soon be starting.

At length she left the shop: her enemy remained, and did not seem to have noticed her movement; yet, soon after, she saw his figure reflected in a looking-glass in an upholsterer's window which she passed—he was but a little way behind. What should she do?

Thus tracked, poor Isabel grew desperately nervous. She did not dare go to the banker's, fearing that the negociation there, in which Mr. Long's name must be used, would betray her. She wandered about the town, not even venturing to purchase the toys she had meant to get as Christmas presents for her children.

The omnibus was to start at five. It grew dark early this gloomy afternoon. Isabel thought that it must then be nearly five. After many turns and windings, during the latter of which she believed herself free from her pursuer, she entered the inn yard. There she waited, keeping out of the light of the flaring lamps, jostled by ostlers, porters, and drivers, feeling more than one glance of impertinent scrutiny strive to pierce her veil as she stood leaning against the wall, surveying the busy scene in the yard, watching its entrance, and everyone who passed through it with keen anxiety. Could she venture to return home that night; or would this

be to guide the destroyer to her nest? She drew back further into shadow, and strove to decide.

The clock in the yard clanged out five; the different vehicles—the omnibus which passed near Arthgwynn, and the two coaches which went in quite different directions, were ready: her decision must be quickly made. Her heart longed for home and her children desperately; how anxious good Mrs. Farr would be if she did not return, and how sorrowful Alice and Percy! Yes, home, home, home! so Isabel's heart clamoured. She left her corner to take her seat in the already half-filled omnibus; as she did so, a pair of sharp eyes fixed themselves upon her; spite of his mufflings she recognised her pursuer ready to step in after her.

"Is this the conveyance for Pontlwynn?" she asked the conductor, naming a place she knew to lay as far apart from Arthgwynn as possible.

"No, indeed, Ma'am, and it's fortunate you asked; this way, Ma'am, this way—ye'd have gone far enough from the right place."

Isabel was hurried into one of the coaches; then she knew the effort her self-command had cost her by the deadly faintness that followed. The man of many mufflings mounted the top of the same coach.

Once away on this wrong track, Isabel breathed more freely.

This was Saturday night, she was travelling she knew not whither, encumbered by the possession of a large sum of money. Not able to forget the desperate anxiety Mrs. Farr would feel, and the way in which her children would bewail her absence on the Sunday which she had always striven to make so happy a day to them. Ay! but if she had gone home, and this spy had followed her *there!* She thanked God fervently for a great deliverance, and strove to trust Him entirely for the rest.

She was very cold and thoroughly weary—there was no other inside passenger. It was not long before she slept.

The stopping of the coach awoke her—she knew she could not be at her journey's end, so sat still, fearing to betray ignorance of where she was. Some one peered in upon her as the light from the windows of an inn lighted up the inside of the vehicle. It was her pursuer: ascertaining, it seemed, if his victim were safe.

Presently they went on again. Could it be true? There

he, her enemy, stood at the inn door looking after the coach. She thought he must be left behind by accident, expected he would hail the coachman, run after them, and be taken up. But no, on they went, and he was left far behind.

Isabel asked herself had she been tormented only by her own fears all day? had his pursuit been idle, or accidental? Or was he now content that he knew where she and her children lived? did he mean to use this knowledge at his leisure? Perhaps he was resorting to stratagem, meaning to come upon her again when he had thrown her off her guard. Isabel believed it to be important that she should leave no trace at Pontlwynn; that it should be impossible to track her thence—home.

It was between two and three on the Sunday morning that she reached her journey's end. It was bitterly cold, and she felt that such a proceeding would endanger her life, or she would have remained out-doors till daylight, making a pretence of going to her own house, rather than become an object of remark at the inn. But her life was precious to others. She ordered a bed-room with a fire, and, after studying a small pocket map to ascertain in what direction Arthgwynn lay, she took off her dress and lay down, to get a little much-needed rest.

When she woke it was rather late, and a bright day. She felt wonderfully fresh, had breakfast in her room, and left the inn; paying the bill, saying that she should not return, as she was going to friends in the country.

Lest anybody should be watching her when she first left the inn she took a road in an opposite direction from the one she intended to pursue, crossing into the other when she was about a mile from the town. Along this road she walked some miles, then entered a little country church, just as the service, which was in Welsh, was beginning.

She had taken the precaution of putting some bread from her breakfast in her pocket; this she ate when she again pursued her way, no longer upon the high road, but along a track over the hills. The wintry sunshine was very bright upon her path, and she was braced up by the pure clear air.

Just as she began to feel very weary she was overtaken by a car, having one empty seat. The friendly driver offered her a ride and this seat. Isabel did not need a second invitation to mount into the vacant place.

The two good-looking Welshwomen had "dym Sassenach," so Isabel was not questioned except by their wondering looks. She was helped many miles on her tedious way—her kind friends were going to afternoon service at a hill-side church. At its door Isabel took thankful leave of them and trudged on again, making much haste while it was light, and she could see her path. The sun had set some time, when Isabel was again overtaken and offered a ride—this time by a young married couple returning homeward after a Sunday spent with the old folk.

"And where are ye going the night?" the young woman asked compassionately, when, after a jolt of about ten miles, they stopped at a neat cottage, a quarter of a mile away from the regular track, quite buried in a hill-side hollow. There was no other house in sight, and Isabel looked round irresolutely.

"If ye could sleep in a bit spare room we've got, you'd be welcome—ay, William?" the young wife continued.

"She's a lady, Jenny, and the place is small," was returned in a whisper.

"But she's in trouble, and, may be, a stranger in these parts."

A short debate was carried on in Welsh; it ended in Isabel's most thankfully accepting the offer of a night's lodging, timidly and respectfully made her. Her heart had failed at the prospect of uncertainly plodding on through the cold and darkness—nothing could have been more welcome than this resting-place. She learnt, too, that on the next day her host was going to a town from whence she knew she could easily reach Arthgwynn, though by a circuitous route. He promised to drive her there, and so she had double cause for thankfulness.

Before it was light in the morning, after a night of restful watchfulness, passed in a queer little nook, Isabel started on her homeward way. Jenny was up to get breakfast for "her man" and her guest, and Isabel parted from her, expressing heart-felt gratitude—she kissed the young wife's rosy cheek, and left in her hand wherewith to buy the stranger's present for a little guest expected shortly to arrive at the hill-side home.

Isabel was set down outside a small market-town, when it was still early morning. She felt the heartiness of her host's handshake long after. Even now she did not allow herself to take the most direct road home; she did not reach Arth-

gwynn till after dark on the Monday night, and then the rejoicing over mamma's return!

It was Christmas eve, and she had managed not to come home quite unprovided with gifts and dainties. Oh, the thankful sense of home peace and comfort that settled down upon Isabel—when the early tea over, the window carefully shuttered and the red curtain drawn, the fire blazing cheerily, Mrs. Farr busy knitting by it, Percy stretched on the hearth-rug in full enjoyment of a new picture book, every few moments breaking out with a shout of mirthful pleasure—Isabel rested on the couch, Alice nestling by her. It was rest indeed! As the shadow of a dream seemed the wild fear, the pain, the danger of the last two days.

Isabel was quiet so long, lying with her head thrown back and her eyes closed, the firelight gleaming only on her white throat, that Alice thought her mother slept.

"Hush, Percy! mamma is asleep, and she must be so tired," the little girl whispered.

"Mamma is not asleep, and she likes to hear Percy laugh, so that she may know she has both her pet lambs safe—safe!" Isabel repeated, and folded Alice closer to her bosom, pressing her lips long, very long, upon the smooth young brow.

"And it's a blessed word that you say, Ma'am—safe," muttered Mrs. Farr.

That night, when the children were asleep, and Isabel, sitting by the table at work, bent her head down close over the candles, she was startled by the suddenness of Mrs. Farr's exclamation, "Mistress, there's many white hairs on your head."

So it was; from this time Isabel's hair rapidly changed colour: the soft silver streaks at first showed distinctly from the glossy darkness of the mass—then the whole of her long abundant tresses grew grey.

Isabel smiled strangely that night as she held a light above her head and looked into her small mirror. "Yes, I am growing grey," she whispered to herself

CHAPTER LVI.

AN ALARM.

ISABEL did not dare go to Bingham again. It was a long time before she even ventured to send a boy there to procure the goods which she had bought. At great inconvenience to herself, and only when it was absolutely necessary, she went to a town in another direction, and at a much greater distance, when she had business to transact.

It was harder than ever to leave the children now after this alarm, and she never did so without gloomy forebodings. She felt sure not only that Percy was still in England, but that he had tried—was still trying—to discover her retreat.

She did not risk sending to the post-office, to which letters to P. B. were addressed, or giving her friends any fresh address; so, though she cautiously contrived to let them know of her well-doing, she remained in ignorance of everything their letters might have told her.

It was very strange, but with all Isabel's dread of her husband began to mingle a desire to see him—her husband, whom she had deeply wronged by her want of love—her husband, to whom her boy grew ever more and more like—her husband, whom she had never loved!

This spring and summer brought her so much enjoyment—in rambles with her children, gladdened by their joyousness and by the great beauty of scenes which she had learnt to love: the brightness of the early spring mornings, the calm loveliness of the summer evenings, could give her such pure delight that she sometimes trembled, thinking—"It is impossible that this can last!—How can I hope to continue so *happy?*" It seemed to her wrong that she was able to be content, while he—her husband and her children's father—was homeless, miserable, guilty! "Oh, God! pity and save my husband!" was her frequent prayer; and now, instead of striving to forget him and the past, she endeavoured to keep

him much in pitying remembrance, and she ardently longed to obtain his forgiveness.

Long ago Isabel had promised to take her children to th sea-shore, to pick up shells, on some fine summer evening, when she could spare the time. Alice and Percy often wondered when this evening would come. It came at last.

The walk was too long for old Mrs. Farr, and the weather too warm: she remained behind to "mind the shop;" Isabel and the children starting before it could be closed.

Isabel had borrowed a pony for the little ones to ride upon by turns, and this much increased their pleasure. She walked beside it, holding the reins. So they set off in high glee towards the distant glittering sands.

The shore was not reached till Isabel was quite tired. Alice and Percy were soon very busy in their search for shells; the pony was tied to a half-sunk stake, and Isabel sat down to rest.

The long, long reach of sand was quite solitary. The tiny figures of Isabel's children were the only moving things to be seen upon it. It lay dazzlingly bright beneath the afternoon sunshine.

On one side the grand chain of nearest mountains rose abruptly—hiding the yet loftier ranges behind from Isabel's lowly position—to flow away, sweep after sweep, into the tender mists of distance, the softened outlines melting one into another. But, on the other hand, the golden level stretched on and on uninterruptedly as far as eye could see. Looking direct seawards, all was blue—the blue sky and blue sea meeting in faint blue haze.

The tide was coming in softly, with a summery, sunshiny murmur and smile, creeping ever higher and higher towards the sea-thistles, rock-roses, and yellow poppies, which grew quite out of reach of any such lazy, languid efforts to salute them.

A sweet and dreamy sadness fell upon Isabel. The calm beauty of the scene touched her to tears. She sat still a long time, and the tears fell unheeded. Suddenly soft arms were put round her neck, and Alice's cheek was pressed against her's.

"What is mamma thinking of? she looks so sorry!" the child whispered. Isabel drew the little girl down into her lap, and pressed many kisses upon the loving eyes, then she looked into them, and said—"I was thinking just then of

poor papa, my darling! poor papa, who has no little daughter to comfort him when he is sad."

Isabel saw the child shrink at mention of her father's name. But after a pause, Alice said, "If papa were to come back, I *would* try to love him, mamma!" Isabel's heart echoed those simple, childish words, "I *would* try to love him;" yet she dared not pray that her husband should return to her. For her children's sake she dared not! Her children stood between her and such a prayer. Oh! that children should ever stand between those they were meant indissolubly to unite.

Isabel's heart presently stood still with terror, as raising her head from Alice's face, she looked round and did not, at first, see Percy, who had strayed behind a great block of rock.

"We will go and help Percy, Ally, for we must not stay much longer," she said, rising and going towards the industrious little collector of curiosities.

After they had watched the sun set into the sea, they prepared to start homeward. The salt wind began to feel cold—the tide came in with quite a different sound.

The glow of the sky, the colours of the mountains, and the deepened, sobered hue of the sands were glorious; but Isabel's joy in beauty was gone for the present. Perplexed thoughts troubled her as she hastened homeward.

That homeward way seemed long, but it was traversed at last, and they reached the garden-gate. "Owens" was waiting to take the pony, and Mrs. Farr was watching for them, having set the tea ready in the parlour.

The children bewildered Mrs. Farr by their eagerness to show their treasures. "What is the matter?—what has happened?" Isabel asked, directly she looked in the good woman's face. Those questions not answered, she entered her own house timidly.

"I hope it's nothing, Ma'am, and I'll tell you all by-and-by. But I think it's nothing indeed but my foolishness," Mrs. Farr replied.

"It's but this," Mrs. Farr began soothingly, when the children were gone to bed—"there's been a 'quisitive-looking body about the place this afternoon. I'm thinking it was a Providence that you and the little ones were out."

"Did he speak to you? Did he come into the house?"

"No—he went to the back and asked the Owens' folk about us. Little enough did he learn; Mrs. Owens is a prudent body!"

"Do you think he is still about?" Isabel asked, fearfully.

"No! Mr. Owens saw him start for Bingham in a car. Indeed—and it's like enough he was only a chance stranger, curious about this pretty place. Now, don't you worry yourself, mistress, or I'll be sorry I told you."

"It was quite right to tell me!"

Isabel often sighed very wearily over her work that evening. She did not tell Mrs. Farr so, but she felt a full conviction that this was the man who had hunted her at Bingham.

The greater part of the night she lay awake, pondering and praying. What should she do? What could she do?

She loved this place—the children loved it—it was a home now. Must she up and away, on such vague alarm, to begin her hard-working life anew? She had not energy enough to resolve to do this. At last it became clear to her that she could do nothing wiser than to wait where she was, putting her trust in God. This she resolved upon, yet the next few days were weary and wearing ones. She was haunted by fear, and did not dare take her wonted rambles with the children. But as week after week went by, and nothing save fear disturbed her household peace, even that gradually grew fainter, and old habits were resumed.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE TWO PENITENTS.

ARTHGWYNN COTTAGE boasted a latticed porch, over which crept a honeysuckle, a clematis, and a climbing cluster-rose; they garlanded it luxuriantly this summer, hanging low down, and keeping it shady and comparatively cool, even in the hot August afternoons. This porch was the pride of Mrs. Owens' heart, inasmuch as it was the work of her "handy man," who had both constructed the framework and trained the plants over it.

Isabel sat in this pretty bower sometimes, now that the evenings were too sultry for walking. At sunset there was generally a breath of wind from off the sea, and she and the children would wait here to feel it.

The heat had made little Percy languid and ill. One evening Isabel sat in the porch with him on her knee; quiet Alice was on a stool at her mother's feet, reading; Mrs. Farr enjoyed an undisturbed nap in the parlour. The longed-for breeze did not come. A fiery-red sun had set the sands a-glow, and then gone down into the sea. Now the sky was brightening to a more intense brilliance, and no whisper of wind stirred among the wreaths of flowered creepers hanging from the porch.

Isabel gazed till her eyes ached, then she closed them. She sang a low song to her feverish boy, who was well content to be in his mother's arms now, though he generally greatly disliked to be treated like a baby. Isabel's song was sad. All the day through she had been weighed upon by fear of coming evil—reasonless fear, which she attributed to phvsical indisposition. Little Percy should know that quaint, melancholy strain well. As his mother murmured it, her thoughts went back to the past; it was as if she were again in her nursery at Burton Lacey. It seemed to her strange that the hand she held pressed against her bosom should no longer be a tiny baby hand.

A shadow fell upon the group, something crossed between it and the crimson sky,—the shadow rested on Isabel's veiled eyes and Alice's book.

It was come!

Alice cried out and clung to her mother. Isabel sprang to her feet, holding her frightened boy closely pressed against her. The shadow had passed from off the group.

Isabel stood as if rooted to the ground, and looked through the flowery screen into her husband's eyes!

Oh, God! It was come!

Still the husband and wife gazed into each other's eyes. Isabel tried to speak, but failed; her lips were white and rigid. Percy came from behind the lattice, and entered the porch.

"Most effective!" he sneered. "Rural and domestic felicity! Sudden entrance of its destroyer! Speechless consternation of the victims!"

Isabel sank down on the seat behind her.

Percy spied about suspiciously.

"The group was not perfect," he said. "I expected to see your friend, young Engledew, ready to play the protector. You may thank him and your father for the pleasure of this visit: that it is a pleasure is very evident. Stop that noise!" he cried, touching the crouching Alice with his foot. "You, Isabel, set down that great boy, and come into the house!"

Isabel obeyed mechanically. "Lost—lost—lost—peace, home, children!" she repeated, mentally. On the threshold she turned to look at the glowing sky, as if she took leave of all joy in Nature's beauty and glory.

Mrs. Farr's slumbers were roughly broken. Percy shook her by the shoulder: before she had recovered from her horrified surprise, he had pushed her from the room, and locked the door behind her.

"Ha! ha! Mrs. Price! so I've found you!" he exclaimed. "You have been getting rich here, perhaps. Everything seems very comfortable."

He threw himself on a sofa, and added—

"I am tired, hungry, and thirsty. Get me some supper."

Still speechless and bewildered, Isabel obeyed. She spread the cloth, and set all that was in the cupboard out upon the table. Percy watched her with those wild, hollow eyes.

When all was ready she placed a chair by the table, and looked towards him. He went into a passion because there

was nothing but water or milk in the house—no wine, beer, or spirits. He threw up the window, called for Mrs. Farr, and bade Isabel give her money to fetch him something.

"That ever a Blanchard should bring me to this!" poor Mrs. Farr muttered, as she trotted down the street, shawl-less and bonnetless, and felt that everyone looked after her wonderingly. But she was too miserable about her mistress and the children to feel all the indignity of her errand.

Percy supped heartily, casting gloomy and angry glances upon his wife now and then. She did not feel them; she sat by the window watching her children. She was able to think and to resolve now. She no longer crouched down, a stricken, stunned creature; she raised her head, and sat erect. Changeful fires shone over her face, giving way at last to an expression of prayerful, passionate patience.

Presently she saw that Percy had finished eating and drinking; he was leaning back in his chair. She left the window, and sat down opposite to him.

"Are you rested and refreshed, Percy?" she asked, in a low, sweet voice, gazing compassionately into his haggard face.

He started, looked at her closely, and exclaimed—

"Your hair is grey! I thought there was some change in you."

"There is more change in me than that, husband."

"So much the better!" he said, and turned his eyes from hers.

She leant upon the table, bending towards him, and said—

"You think this place looks comfortable and home-like?"

"*You* ask *me* that?"

"Yes! No one knows us here, Percy. I work and get my bread and the children's."

"Of course, knowing that it would please me to have my wife turned shopkeeper!" Percy snarled.

Isabel did not heed, except that she laid her hand upon one of his, which played restlessly with things upon the table, and spoke, yet more earnestly—

"Percy, I can work for you, too! Stay with us! No one here knows our history. We would begin again all our married life. You should not find me proud and unloving. You would learn to take great joy in the children—you would love them; perhaps, too, in time you would again love their mother. Then, indeed, we might feel God's blessing upon us. Percy, husband, stay with us! Let the children have a

father. Let me work for you, and strive to atone for the miserable past."

His hand had lain quiet beneath hers : his eyes had been fixed steadily upon the wedding-ring on her finger.

Now he threw that hand away.

"You are the most accomplished actress, the most consummate hypocrite !" he began, violently. She recoiled, as if he had struck her. "The most consummate hypocrite !" he repeated. "If I had not seen your look when I came upon you unawares I could believe you. But then your eyes spoke true—they said, 'I hate you.' Yes, woman, you hate your husband, and he pays you hate for hate !"

"No, Percy, no ! Do not say such words," Isabel cried, passionately. "It was fear, only fear. Percy, you must believe me ! It was fear, fear—I was afraid !"

"You never loved me when I worshipped you, when I was your slave !" Percy said, with sullen slowness. "How can I believe that you do not hate me now that I have injured you ?"

"Percy ! I swear, as I hope for God's mercy, which I sorely need, that I do not hate you. My heart is changed. Husband ! try me, stay with me." She knelt before him, clasped his hand in both hers, bowed her head upon his knee, then looking up into his face with imploring, agonised eyes, she cried—"Oh, the misery I have known ! Oh, the sin and misery I have caused ! I cannot be sure of God's pardon till I have won yours—till I have saved you by my love. Stay with me, Percy ; stay with me, husband !"

He looked at her doubtfully. "You cannot say that you ever loved me," he said.

"I never did. But I will learn to love you now, if you will let me. Try me !"

"It is because you fear for your children that you are so wild and earnest. You think I am come to take away the boy."

"Percy, for a moment I had forgotten him—I was thinking only of my husband—desiring to learn to do my duty as a wife—desiring to atone to you. You look ill and wretched, and poor, and I have been the cause of all your suffering. Stay with us, Percy ! Let me work for you ! Stay with us !"

The sneer had passed from Percy's mouth—the scorn and anger had melted from his heart. He put his hand upon his wife's head heavily, and looked deep down into her eyes.

Tears rained down from them, but they did not flinch from his scrutiny. Firmly she held his other hand; he felt her heart beat against his knee. He could not doubt her.

His tone was that of one heart-subdued, and heart-broken also, when he said—

"Isabel, I *must* believe you! Would to God it were not too late!" He removed his hand and covered his eyes; he wept now.

Isabel rose. She went away to return a moment after with her boy—the little Percy, who was so like his father.

"Ask papa to stay at home with us," she said. "Ask him to help mamma to take care of little Percy."

"Will you, papa?" Percy met one glance of his young son's, who tried to pull his father's hand down from before his eyes.

"Papa is crying," the child said to Isabel.

"Take him away: I cannot bear it. This is too late, too late!" Percy sobbed. "I cannot bear it! You are breaking my heart."

Isabel sent the boy to his sister. Then she sat down beside her husband.

"No—it is not too late—it is never too late. Percy, we will learn patience with one another. We will not part—nothing ought to part us, and nothing need."

Percy still covered his eyes, and said—"Too late!"

"It shall not be! It must not be too late!"

Isabel's resolution ever strengthed. She had begun this pleading from an earnest and religious sense of duty. As she went on, and her husband became softened and subdued, her heart opened to him pityingly and tenderly: she began thoroughly to believe in the possibility of real, loving union between her changed self and the father of her children. Vistas of hope, of fair promise, of holy peace, opened to her imagination, one after another.

She clung to her husband, entreating, pleading ever more passionately. It seemed very life and hope of Heaven's forgiveness, for which she pleaded. The miserable, thoroughly broken down Percy wept like a child. Isabel drew his head upon her shoulder—there he let it rest.

But when he spoke again, it was to say those same sad words—"Too late!"

"I am safe nowhere in Europe. I am a criminal, and am pursued. To-morrow I must sail from Liverpool for Australia. I must sail alone! I am safer alone. It is too late."

"God pity us!" said Isabel. After a long silence, she added—"We cannot go with you, even if it would be safe; we have not money enough; we should burden you. We will follow you."

This was said in a quiet, earnest voice, which challenged no comment. He looked at her wonderingly, and could not but believe.

"Now that I am deserted by all I thought my friends, *you* cling to me!"

"It is only my duty, Percy," she answered.

She left him for a little presently, to send the children to bed. She asked Mrs. Farr to sit in the bed-room, or in Mrs. Owens' kitchen, and stayed to say some comforting words to the poor perplexed old lady.

When Isabel returned to the parlour she found Percy stretched upon the couch in an uneasy sleep; his attitude was one of utter and desperate weariness. She paused beside him, gazing sorrowfully upon his face. She noted its wrinkles, its haggardness, the deeply-drawn lines of pain and fear, which such sleep as his could not smooth out.

Isabel knelt by his side. She pushed back the matted, uncared-for locks from her husband's forehead, and pressed her lips there—with no light, careless touch, but with a long, lingering, remorseful pressure. Doing so, the recollection of the only other times she had voluntarily kissed Percy flashed upon her. An intensity of conflicting emotion was in Isabel's heart as she watched her sleeping husband. There was no lingering trace of her late repugnance there now. How could there be, now that she was so deeply abased and penitent—now that she breathed such fervent prayers that God would let her save this soul, wrecked, as she sadly believed, through her sin? If she took his crimes upon herself, he must seem to her as one, weak indeed, but more suffering, sinned against, than sinning—as one who had been desperate, but whom she had driven to desperation—as one who had yielded to evil, but whom she had driven into temptation—as one any and every way less guilty than herself.

Again the penitent wife pressed her lips upon the brow of her sleeping husband *lovingly*. He stirred and woke. He opened his eyes to see hers beaming down tearful pity and tenderness upon him. He awoke in affright, crying, "Save me!"

"God helping me, I will," answered Isabel, stedfastly.

"Isabel, wife, if I had but known you sooner!" and he drew her into a passionate embrace.

They spent the night together in the little parlour. They talked, and, for the first time, prayed together. All the hours of the summer night found them waking and watching.

Isabel's heart was drawn unto her husband's in wifely love. Love that owes nothing to the merits of the creature loved, but is poured forth freely from the abundance of the lover, is purest love. It is not like God's irrespective impartial love for His creatures. A proud woman cannot love thus : she will love "worthily" and comprehendingly, adding honour to herself from the honourableness of the one loved ; yet, perhaps, it was thus that one woman loved long ago, who was forgiven much because she had loved much. It was thus that Isabel, proud no more, loved Percy now and long after.

With the first streak of dawn Percy and Isabel left Arthgwynn Cottage. They had bent together over the sleeping children. Percy had left a father's kiss upon the lovely face of his little daughter, no longer hateful to him, because it was like her mother's. Isabel went with her husband to Liverpool, she saw him sail, and returned home.

For some days she was prostrated by an attack of fever. She rose from her bed of sickness a holier, happier, more resolute woman. She loved her husband! she had one grand aim in life. She loved the father of her children, and there was a hitherto-unknown unity in her life.

All the world knew more of Percy Blanchard's follies and crimes than did his wife. Even to Arthgwynn came papers containing accounts of his career : Isabel did not see these. If she had known everything, it would have made no difference now.

CHAPTER LVIII.

"WIFE, SAVE ME!"

THROUGH all the time of windy skies and wildly-troubled waters, when yellow beams of dazzling brilliance, and purple shadows of gloomy depth, would swiftly alternate upon the wide tract of searing gorse and weed-strewn sand,—when the nearer mountain sides seemed a mere canvas on which were depicted fantastic and ever-changing forms, sailing slowly singly, hurrying tumultuously athwart them, floating fairyly upwards towards sun-steeped summits, or descending headlong towards wave-washed base;—when the distant mountain-ranges, wrapped in storm-glooms, in sunset affluence of glory, or in delicate and tender-hued slight robes of softened light and penetrable shade, in each and every of their infinite variety of mood were superlative in power, in beauty, meaning, mystery;—through all the time of yet wilder winds and fiercer storm-lashed waters—when "the froth from the lip of the bleak black sea" was whirled away far inland, scudding before the blast from which was no escape;—when the hoarse booming of waves mingled with the mad, down-leaping cries of swollen mountain-torrents;—when the casements of Arthgwynn Cottage were ever and anon passionately shaken by the tempest that demanded entrance, and their panes continually dimmed by spray—through all the autumn and early winter months, profound peace brooded over the inhabitants of the cottage.

Isabel, as she watched the fury of the tempest that whitened the dark waters, or broke among the mountains, would smile —a smile of ineffable sweetness and of holy thankfulness—she did not doubt. A complete calm had come down upon her life; it seemed to have worked its way clear of all storms. It was so new and blessed a thing to live in hope, free from fear.

Through the sullen cold and stillness, through the fickle

stir and brightening of late winter and early spring, Isabel's peace remained to her.

"Indeed, mistress, you work too hard, and you'll wear yourself out," Mrs. Farr would say.

"Indeed, nurse, I am resting most thoroughly. I shall not wear out while such hope strengthens me," would be the answer.

Isabel did work hard. Her shop shut, a little repose taken, and her children put to bed, then, however rough or wet the night, out trudged Isabel to give singing and music lessons in the town. Yet it was true that she was resting—resting on a sure conviction of right doing, on a near hope of making reparation. These had never been hers before.

"To begin together a new life in a new world."

Percy, so far away, his wife never thought of him as the criminal who had outraged God's law and man's. She recalled him only as he had appeared to her in the last hours they had spent together—as a penitent whose penitence she must share, for whom she trusted to help to win forgiveness. So thinking of her husband, the words she often repeated seemed ever to suggest to her more and more matter for thankful hope; and of this hope she never doubted the realisation; she never doubted that the future would be of her own fancied fashion—that her own will would come to pass.

Already she lived this future in her ardent imagination.

Isabel longed for sympathy: why did she not seek for it from her father and few true friends?

Percy had a desperate fear of pursuit and arrest. He had told Isabel that he should be far safer if she still remained unknown—if she still kept the place of her abode a secret—if she would let no one hear of his visit to her yet—and if she allowed some time to elapse before she prepared to follow him.

Isabel was not likely to neglect any precaution: for the present she must do without sympathy in her new hopes, her new freedom. The only indulgence she allowed herself was that of writing more frequently to her father and to the Longs, and of sending regularly to the place to which they addressed their letters for her.

Perhaps she sometimes thought that had she been at liberty to open her heart, seeking sympathy, she might but have given and experienced pain. Would her friends trust Percy as she now trusted him? Would they not rather hold her scheme to be a mad, a desperate one? Would they not

assail her with entreaties—strive in every way to shake her resolution? Was she unconsciously conscious how terribly they might tempt her if they urged the well-being of her children against her new devotion to her husband? Did she imagine that they might counsel her, if go she would, to go *alone?*

In truth, Isabel,—though, putting away the longing for sympathy, she strove not to think of these things,—dreaded the time when she should lay herself open to opposition, going to take leave of her friends: this she meant to do when she had heard from Percy that he was in every way safe—that it was expedient for her to join him.

From Mrs. Farr Isabel had a foretaste of what the opposition of her other friends might be. The old lady bitterly disliked the thought of her mistress and the children leaving home and comfort, and crossing the wide seas to join the man who had been the bane of their lives for years. She could not enter into Isabel's view of the matter; she had utterly discarded Percy as a most unworthy Blanchard. In her eyes Isabel had done no wrong: it made her angry to hear her mistress speak of penitence—of making atonement.

"You've been the good mother always. All you had you gave up to your husband, and now you slave yourself to death for your children. What have you to repent of? Tell me now, mistress?" Mrs. Farr demanded.

"Nurse, you do not understand. I committed a great crime, I wronged and mocked one who loved me well then. I married him when I believed I could never love him. Do not say again that I have nothing of which to repent."

Through the inclement weather of the winter, through the late treacherous spring, Isabel bore up and worked on, not knowing one day's illness. It was strange to her, feeling so young in life and power, to look in the glass and see a face, worn sharp and wan, framed in soft, silvery grey hair.

Surely, had Percy been a long and passionately loved husband, his wife would have paled with fear, hearkening to the autumn tempests, and would long ago have doubted the realisation of her fond desires. As it was, it seemed to Isabel that her conscience and reason were more concerned than her heart—she could not doubt that God would grant her prayers when she only prayed for opportunity of discharging long arrears of duty: that she was likely to make a passion and an idol of duty, she did not imagine.

In sunny hill-side nooks Alice and Percy found primroses

—one flower after another brought home to "mamma," marked the progression of weeks and months. The hawthorns in the little lane, whitened with blossoms, and May flowers did not come till June this year.

Percy had been gone nearly ten months. Isabel began to expect a letter from him—to watch for it day by day. Expectation and watching were followed by the heart-sickness of hope deferred—by the heavy weariness of a resumed burden of anxiety.

Percy's last words had been a solemn promise to write as soon as he reached land.

June expired, and July was far gone. This uncertainty Isabel could not well bear.

Now, when the sun shone brightly the long day through, when the skies were blue and cloudless, when the wind was gentle and balmy, when the sea, a plain of flashing light, sent forth no murmur that could be audible at the cottage, in those short, warm, summer nights, this, and such as this, was often Isabel's dream—

A terrible storm at sea: threateningly overhanging sky; open-mouthed mountainous billows, the very jaws of darkness. An abandoned wreck, now heaved up, now engulfed, now washed over by the black waters. There is a drifting spar, a man clings to it; pale light shows the ghastly terror of his wild face; his eyes, despairing, dying, drowning eyes, are strained in a stare on Isabel; above the clamouring of wind and waters, she hears the shrill cry of extreme agony. "Wife, save me!" are the words that reach her ear.

She struggles towards him—she nears him—she stretches her arms out to him. A hill of black water runs up between them—a horror of great darkness overwhelms her—she hears a death scream, and wakes! Not to sleep again, but to pray with an intense fervour unchastened by submission—"Father, that I may save him! Great God, let me save him!"

Then she would question herself. Were these dreams, typically or literally, intimations of truth? Was her husband struggling desperately with waves of temptation, and in spirit crying upon her to save him? or had he, just as in the often-recurring dreadful dream, struggled awhile with devouring billows; his despairing, dying, drowning thoughts with her, till a sable wall of water fell upon him and destroyed him?

No letter came.

The peace that had endured through autumnal storm, wintry desolation, spring sullenness, was dissipated by the shining of the unclouded summer sun. It had not been the perfect peace of mere believing. Isabel was not yet unwilled.

Isabel worked on mechanically now, looking a mere ghost. All the day through, her heart did not wake from the dreams of the night, she had no power to throw off their influence. Even for her children she had only vague words and shadowy smiles; she caressed them from habit, without warmth or delight.

So things went on. Isabel would not confess that she was ill; but a low fever was heavy upon her. She had toiled in hope with over-wrought strength, that did not feel fatigue; now she toiled on still, in despair, conscious, however, that the power to toil was gradually abandoning her. She could not bear the sight of food, and sometimes walked about her room the night long rather than chance the recurrence of those dreams which were far more terrible than even her waking thoughts, for in them was no recognition of any hope, or any faith. They were as infinitely, as vaguely dreadful.

One morning, when Percy had been gone nearly a year, Isabel crept down the hill-side and crossed the bridge as usual, going to her shop. Before entering, she paused, looking along the street, then lifted her eyes to the softened grandeur of the light mist-veiled ruggedness of the hills. There was an almost excusing expression in her dull sad eyes.

> "As if God verily made you for yourselves,
> And would not interrupt your life with ours,"

was the spirit of her thought.

Alice was with her mother; Percy was at play on the hill-side, Mrs. Farr watching him; but Alice thought she could take care of mamma, and would not be left behind.

As usual, Isabel received a younger sister of her first pupil, Florence Meredith—opened the piano, and prepared to give the customary lesson.

Alice sat in a high chair behind the counter in the shop, darning Percy's socks, and ready to call mamma from the music lesson, if any customer should come in, and want waiting on.

"Dear Mrs. Price, I am sure you are ill! don't try to give

me my lesson to-day—you are not able!" Annie Meredith said compassionately, and delayed to take off her bonnet and gloves.

"Yes, I am able—I would rather, thank you," Isabel answered with her wandering smile. She took her seat beside the piano, and smoothed out Miss Meredith's music.

We can do so much from habit! Isabel corrected each wrong note, commanded the repetition of each faulty passage, and the lesson went on, just as usual.

Presently Alice came in; she stood waiting patiently till her mother looked up—then she said,—

"There is a gentleman in the shop who wants something, mamma. Mamma!" she added softly,—"he said that I was very like someone he had known long ago—he looks a very kind gentleman."

"Excuse me, my dear!" Isabel rose, shaking from head to foot, as any slight surprise, suspense or alarm, would cause her to shake.

She entered the shop.

"I knew it must be! How we have sought for you—your father and I!"

It was Leigh Engledew who took Isabel's hand. His recognition of her had not been instantaneous—he had recoiled with a shocked expression on his face at first.

"It was the music in the window that betrayed you—mine some of it, which is not so popular as to be likely to find its way into a small town in Wales by natural means."

Leigh looked very agitated and white. He talked fast. He could have wept in bitterness of spirit, but he smiled instead, and turned to speak to Alice,—"She is so like you!" he remarked.

"Did you say my father was ——"

"Is in this town—I must let him know that you are found—you live up there, Alice tells me. Will you go home, and let me bring your father to you?"

"Let me go to him."

"No; I must prepare him for—the surprise. He has hardly hoped to find you here. Let me help you home, then I will bring him to you very soon."

Isabel fetched her bonnet and shawl, and dismissed her pupil with a meek apology.

"Has your mamma been ill long, Alice?" Leigh asked while she was gone.

"Mamma says that she is not ill." Alice gazed into the questioner's face, as Leigh leant on the counter—having inspected him with a child's keen scrutiny, she cast her eyes down upon her work, and he, in, turn, could attentively pursue her delicate features.

"You will like to see your grand-papa?" he asked, wishing again to meet the lovely violet eyes.

"Yes;—I am very glad he has come to mamma."

Isabel returned—"Alice, darling, I will send Mrs. Farr to shut up the shop, and bring you home," she said. "I shall not be able to come back—at least not to-day."

A short time afterwards, Isabel was in her father's arms.

For the first time for so long, so very long; yet she soon disengaged herself, and looking into the aged and sorrowful face, said,—

"You have something to tell me about my husband"—from her father's last letters she had found that he knew that her husband had sailed for Australia. She added; "Tell me quickly, while I have strength to listen: I have been overtried—I am going to be ill."

"My darling, my poor darling!"

"Oh tell me, quick!" she urged with sick impatience. "It hurts me, the suspense, so much."

Her hand was pressed against her heart, and her face contracted with pain. Her father hastened to speak.

"The ship your husband sailed in ——"

"Ah!" breathed Isabel, now clutching Leigh's arm for support.

"It has not reached Sydney—there were terrible gales—it was wrecked, and all on board perished."

Isabel's hold relaxed—she sank upon the ground.

They had not thought that the blow would be great; knowing more than she knew of Percy's career, not knowing of her last interview with him, and of her new-born feelings for her miserable husband—they had reasoned that, though no doubt, the first shock of their intelligence would be painful, yet that this pain would, probably, be soon followed by a sense of relief.

Isabel was crushed by her father's words.

They seemed to close upon her the portal of doom—shutting her off from hope—all hope of working out her repentance, her husband's salvation, her own through his. There darkened down over her a cloud through which her faith

could not penetrate, through which not one smallest, feeblest ray of light could reach her.

The first cry was one of accusation against an inexorable, pitiless, unregarding power; then she wholly succumbed beneath the blow.

For a time death or life-long madness seemed the only possible alternative.

CHAPTER LIX.

GOVERNESS AND PUPIL AGAIN.

ON one of those fair days which seem like jewels of mild radiance, lost by May, found among dead leaves when autumn winds stir them by November, set by that melancholy dame among her cold and mist-hued garments upon her colder bosom, Isabel, carefully shawled and shrouded, lay in the sunshine, on the seat beneath the almost bare walnut-tree at Wrangham.

Her grey hair was smothly folded beneath a widow's cap. Spite of grey hair, widow's cap, and deep lines round eyes and mouth, Isabel looked young. An almost infantine sweetness shone from her face. Her thin cheek was laid upon her shadowy hand, her eyes were following the gambols of her children with their grandfather, with Leigh and Ellen Blanchard.

Close beside Isabel sat Miss Erlridge, quite quiet, while Isabel's face expressed nothing but restful content.

But presently Isabel covered her eyes, and shuddered.

"Look at Percy now," Miss Erlridge said.

"I see him. Oh, it is terrible! Shall I never, never forget those dreams?"

Miss Erlridge, with soft words and caressing touches, contrived to soothe the feeble invalid. When Isabel removed her veiling hands, and laid her head back wearily, her good friend said—

"For once we are alone. You are better; let me speak to you of the past just a little, Isabel. It is not good for you always to be quite silent about it."

"*You* may say anything you like to me."

"I think I understand what hurts you most. You had planned a life of reparation: you hoped, by patience and unwearying charity ——"

"Love—say love. Then first, that last time I loved my husband. Oh, that he had lived!"

"Do not agitate yourself, dear, or they will scold me—I shall do you harm, instead of good."

"I am quiet; you will not harm me."

"I want you to be quiet—always—to feel, what it is so easy to say—that all was for the best—that God knew, had weighed your strength. Believe, dear, that He *has* answered the spirit of your prayers for your husband in His own way —truly to us an incomprehensible, yet, we must be sure, a perfect way."

"But, oh! that terrible, sudden death! If I could but forget the face I saw in my dreams!" She moaned like a child in pain.

"You will forget. As you grow strong, and turn your attention outward again, the impressions left by those diseased fancies will wear off. Then, as to the terror of sudden death—you cannot tell but that life would have been a far worse ill for him and for you. Think, Isabel, if you had failed in the strength of patience—if he had plunged into vice again—and his power to resist temptation seemed wholly gone! It is bold of me to talk so to you, perhaps; but if you could only learn to think of your husband as still within the sphere of God's mercy (and he must be; for it is written, 'There shall not one soul perish'), you would lose the sense of haunting horror which more than anything hinders your recovery. You see, love, we must needs be presumptuous when we repine at the thwarting of our wills. It is setting up our judgment against His."

"Yes, I am very ungrateful. I think my soul is even weaker than my body. I have grown childish."

"I think that the heart and the faith as of a little child may be yours. You thought to discipline yourself by the doing of certain work. He sees fit to discipline you by taking such work out of your hands. Yes, I think you will learn to be trustful as a child; then you will be blessed indeed."

"Trustful as a child—to trust God as Alice trusts me—rest indeed!" Isabel spoke softly, smiling her rare smile. "It is just this that life has taught you, Miss Erlridge—just this, that ——"

"That should make me 'rejoice evermore,' if I had learnt the lesson perfectly. Here comes one of your nurses, and it is time I went home."

"Are you tired, mamma?" Alice asked. She was never to be kept long from her mother's side.

She was now drawn closer and closer to her mother's breast. Isabel's lips lingered on the pure young brow. Little Percy came creeping up. Both children were enclosed in a long and steady embrace.

"My darlings! my precious ones!" the widow whispered. "Spare these to me now, O Lord! if it be Thy Will; and one day let them meet their earthly father in Thy heaven!" That was Isabel's prayer.

"Is it not time you went into the house, dear Isabel?" asked Ellen. "The sun has gone from the seat. I am afraid you will take cold."

"I will go in, if you think I had better." The invalid smiled up at her pretty nurse.

"You look tired. I will call Leigh to carry you."

"Leigh is here, and very much at your service," said a voice from over Ellen's head.

Tears came into Miss Erlridge's eyes while she looked at Leigh and Isabel, so nearly the same age, as the strong young man bent down to lift the invalid, and her wasted, sickly-hued arms were passed round his neck. Isabel was light as a child. There was something childlike in her timid clinging. It needed for Leigh to see her silvery hair to remember that it was not little Alice whom he bore in his arms.

Leigh felt his strength and manhood painfully as, having softly laid his burden upon the couch in the large windowed drawing-room, he gazed down upon her compassionately with those bright eyes of his.

He stooped, kissed her hands, and asked, "Can I do anything for my poor sister?"

"Indeed, no; you do too much, all of you. But I am very thankful."

"I know you are, and all that is good besides, sweet soul." Leigh turned away quickly. He met Ellen Blanchard coming up the stairs with some of Isabel's shawls and cushions. For once her beautiful face looked quite too bright and young to please him. He passed her hastily without a look or word.

Sitting in the great window, watching Isabel's sleep—watching the faintly rosy sunset-light fall upon and fade from one marbly-white cheek, Ellen had time to wonder why she had been so strangely treated.

CHAPTER LX.

"I AM CONTENT!"

WHEN spring came, Isabel was no longer an invalid. She was, and she always remained, a frail-looking woman; but a brave, though quiet and chastened, spirit animated this frail body.

The winter had been a time of enforced physical rest; but her couch had been a post of observation.

In spite of Mr. Wold's efforts to keep everything that could pain her from Isabel's knowledge, she discovered much that did pain her cruelly.

At Wrangham many significant changes had been made. She gathered, from chance remarks of Rose and Ellen's, that strict economy was practised at Moor Hall. She learnt that Greville, good, quiet Greville, of whom she saw nothing, was "in business;" he had been taken into partnership by a prosperous though humble connection of his mother's family; his two younger brothers were with him, and the girl to whom he had been attached had married, years ago, while he was vainly striving to save his brother from ruin.

Burton Lacey was to be sold. When she discovered this, Isabel's thoughts went sadly back to the past. "Clara! Clara! how little you knew what you were doing when you took me home with you!" she mused.

She was very silent on the morning when she first heard this intelligence, as she and Rose Blanchard (Ellen had returned to Moor Hall) sat at work. By-and-by Isabel's work dropped, and her head rested on her hands; she seemed to be thinking absorbedly.

After many uneasy glances, Rose asked shyly if it were not time to take the children out for their walk. Rose was tired of sitting quiet, and was troubled by Isabel's abstraction.

Isabel roused herself, and they went to the woods to see if the wood-anemones were blooming yet—the wood which had been a haunt of Isabel's in old times.

"Rose, when did papa say that Richard would be home?" she asked.

"In six months, I think."

There was another long silence.

"When I have a home of my own, I am afraid that you and Ellen will not come and see me so often," Isabel said by-and-by.

"I thought you would live always at Wrangham."

"We must look forward, dear. Alice and Percy will not always be children; their education will cost a great deal, and papa is not at all rich now. Richard will live at Wrangham, and take care of papa. I want to do something to earn money for the children."

"But what can you do, Isabel!" asked Rose perplexedly.

Isabel looked at her young companion timidly.

"All the winter I have been thinking over this. Rose, would it shock you if I did in Caiston what I did in Wales?—if I were to keep a shop?"

"Oh, Isabel!"

"It would, dear?"

"I suppose it ought not to shock me, if it is right," Rose replied slowly. "I know that Reginald sometimes scolds Ellen for the kind of pride that—but—but wouldn't it be very disagreeable to you, Isabel?"

"These things do not trouble me, dear, now; but I know how, when I was your age, I should have felt if I had been in your position. There is no need for me to live in Caiston," she added, with a sigh.

"One ought not to mind, I believe," Rose repeated. "*You* will be *quite* the same. Tell me all about it, please. What kind of shop will it be?"

"That I do not know yet. A music shop, probably. We will talk no more of this now. I only wanted to find out how you would feel about it."

Again that evening, when everyone else had retired, Isabel and her father talked over plans for the future. Isabel, in the end, prospered in her patient and humble pleading; her father was not rich now, and Richard had not made a fortune abroad. Mr. Wold's reason approved Isabel's resolution.

A few days afterwards, when the Longs and Ellen Blanchard were at Wrangham, a grand family consultation was held—Miss Erlridge and Leigh being likewise present.

Isabel underwent a cross-examination.

"And why do you think that you should prefer going into business to trying to earn your children's living in any other way?" Mr. Long asked.

"I think that I shall be able to keep them more constantly with me—that I shall be able to support them comfortably without the slavery and separation which I should needs experience if I devoted myself to any kind of teaching."

"You have considered Miss Erlridge's kind proposal?"

"Yes; but I could not join her, as she wished. She ought to dispose of her school profitably, and give up work now."

"And your father thinks you have a chance of success in business?"

"He thinks I have a good chance. You see, I am not quite inexperienced. In Wales we did very well."

There was a pause. Isabel lifted her eyes to seek those of Clara and Ellen, who were in a state of suppressed mutiny, for different reasons entertaining equally strong objections to their sister-in-law's plan.

"Let me say a few words for my daughter," Mr. Wold began, after having glanced at the various expressions on the faces round him. "I know that Isabel has resolved not to act in any way against the feeling of her friends—that she is ready either to leave Caiston and begin life elsewhere, or to endeavour to discover some other way of earning a livelihood: the last is not an easy thing for the mother of two children to do. My father and his father before him were tradesmen—upright, honourable men, who were not ashamed of their condition. Still, I understand, and so does my daughter, the feeling that is entertained in Caiston and its neighbourhood towards the shopkeeping class—how connection with them involves loss of caste—how association with them is scrupulously avoided by members of our old aristocracy, yet more scrupulously, perhaps, by members of our would-be new aristocracy. I need hardly say that I have little sympathy with the susceptibilities of either set—that I regard this prejudice as wholly inconsistent with the spirit of the religion which we all profess—as totally opposed to the progress and enlightenment of which we hear so much. Still I know that though you and yours, Mr. Long, may be above such petty pride"—here Mr. Wold glanced at Ellen with a half-stern smile—"yet you may be placed in an awkward position in society by your connection with my daughter, should she go into business. I say again that I am sure

Isabel will not proceed one step further unless she has your cordial approbation of the course she wishes to pursue."

"Indeed I will not." Isabel cast a deprecating glance at Ellen's flushed face. "My first thought was to leave Caiston; but papa ——"

"Why did you think of flying from friends?" asked Mr. Long.

"That I might not in any way hurt anyone's feelings."

"But your own feelings? You will find keeping a shop in Caiston and at Arthgwynn very different."

Isabel smiled softly. "I think I shall not mind the difference," she said. "I think that the pride that might have been pained is dead. Indeed, of what could I be proud!" she asked, tears suffusing her soft eyes.

"And of what should we be proud save of her?" exclaimed Leigh. "She is everything that is most pure, and noble, and womanly. You ought all to praise and reverence her, instead of so coldly considering her words."

"Isabel has one enthusiastic champion, the others may be temperate," Reginald said, smiling. "Our sister will secure the affection, the esteem, even, as Leigh requires, the reverence of all whose good opinion is of value—about the opinions of others we will not care." Mr. Long took his wife's hand as he spoke: Clara's face cleared suddenly, then she hid her tearful eyes on her husband's shoulder.

"Well done, temperate champion," cried Leigh.

There were many more questions asked and explanations given. It was settled that as soon as everything could be arranged, Isabel should open a music and musical-instrument shop in Caiston, in Castle Street, in that very house where she had lived as a girl; it happening, strangely enough, to be now vacant.

"Your pianos, Isabel," said Leigh, trying to give a merry turn to further deliberations of the family council, "shall be selected with immense care and excellent judgment by the celebrated performer and gifted composer, Herr Engledew, some time Kappell-meister to His Most Serene Highness, the far-famed Prince ——"

Here Leigh stopped short. Ellen Blanchard passing him in her way from the room, had given him a look of most unmistakable haughtiness and displeasure.

"Leave her to herself a little," Mr. Long said to Isabel, noticing that her eyes followed the young girl wistfully, and that she was about to rise.

Isabel obeyed, and was patient through much further discussion. At length, however, she glided away.

Those she left behind, gathered together in the great sunny window, looked over the fair country and spoke eagerly in Isabel's praise—spoke of her wise devotion to her children, of her exhaustless patience, of her wide charity, and of her profound humility.

* * * * *

When Richard came home, he found his sister established in the old house in Castle Street. All connected with Isabel seemed to him part of a wild, fantastic dream; he watched her every expression and movement with a kind of fascination; it was so hard to reconcile new things and old, to believe that this silver-haired widow, with her calm, lovely face, and her meek, gentle ways, was his once so proud sister Isabel. Poor Richard hardly knew whether to rejoice at the change, or to weep over the thought of the suffering that must have wrought it.

It was with Isabel at Caiston somewhat as it had been at Arthgwynn: curiosity brought her much custom: whether people most pitied or blamed, they patronised her. She was "diligent in business," and prospered. Leigh Engledew, growing in fame and favour, always remained her trusty friend. When he married, his young wife forgot her pride of birth in pride of him, and faithfully loved and deeply reverenced his friend—her poor brother's widow.

From this time forth Isabel's life was ever a busy one: all pauses in needful toil were filled by work for others.

Isabel had learnt through suffering to "rejoice evermore;" had learnt that absolute dependence on a Higher Will, which is the only possible human independence of storms of so-called Fate and Fortune.

She had now a capacity for finding inexhaustible delight in simple pleasures.

Her morning and evening walks with the children, her Sundays passed at Wrangham, her occasional times of serene meditation in the old cathedral, or of listening there to Leigh's glorious playing; every proof of Percy's talents and increasing docility, and of Alice's quiet genius and intense affection: all these were sources of purest pleasure and motives for highest gratitude.

Perhaps Isabel, in a chastened, sober fashion, was now

more nearly happy than many of us ever are. She could say, she did say, "I am content."

In times of firelight or twilight musing, when her cheek rested on Alice's fair head, and her arm enwound her boy, her blessedness would often bring those words upon her lips. With a soft, slow smile, a significant lingering in her utterance she would then say, "I am content."

Do many of us ever so say, "I am content?"

THE END.

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